

“So you’re back, are you?” Vernon Dursley spat the moment his nephew was within hearing range. Harry sighed, taking his time as he pushed his trolley towards the fat man. His uncle seemed to be in an even fouler mood than he used to be, but maybe he was remembering the goblets that had bounced around on his head last summer, when Dumbledore had come to thankfully rescue Harry. The slight smile the memory allowed him faded at the thought of Dumbledore. It still hurt to think of him, now that he was gone.

But Vernon’s mind seemed to be on something else. His beady eyes followed the two other people behind Harry, people who seemed to be trailing Harry a little closely –

“Who’re they?”

Harry turned around to look at his two companions. “Oh, these are my friends,” he said as politely as he could. “Hermione and Ron.”

Vernon’s face seemed to turn a rather unpleasant shade of purple at this introduction. “I won’t be seen consorting with any more of your people; no I won’t!” he said firmly, glaring heatedly at Harry.

However, the effect was lost on Harry, who had seen much more intimidating and horrifying things in his life. Vernon Dursley had never, for instance, met a Dementor and was forced to hear his mother’s last words over and over again. Nor had he ever felt the slimy, icy skin of Inferi clutching onto his arm, trying to drag him down to the depths, or watched in horror as a monster was reborn, saw it rise above the bubbling cauldron, its red snake-like eyes penetrating every fiber of his body –

No, Vernon Dursley was hardly terrifying.

“They’ll be staying over,” Harry informed his uncle, eyes serious and more mature than Vernon had ever seen them be. “No arguments. Just bear with us until my birthday, and we’ll be out of your hair for good. Let them stay, Uncle Vernon; it’s the least you can do.”

Vernon puffed out indignantly, insulted about his “freakish” nephew ordering him around. The nerve of that boy! “Why, you . . . ‘the least you can do?’ You ungrateful brat! You should be appreciative of all we did for you! We fed you, clothed you, gave you a roof over your head, and a bed to sleep in! You have no right to tell me –”

Ron and Hermione exchanged significant glances. So this was the infamous Vernon Dursley. They had seen the enormous man from afar –it was very hard not to notice him– but had never before been this close. Hermione carefully watched Harry and was surprised to find her friend’s expression unreadable and fairly bored. He didn’t look angry, which was the response Hermione had been expecting out of him.

“No,” Harry interrupted firmly, eyes cold. “You fed me Dudley’s scraps, gave me his huge clothes, and forced me to sleep in a cupboard under the stairs for eleven years until magic scared you enough into actually giving me a proper bedroom.” All the while, Harry’s voice had remained calm and controlled, even when he stressed certain points. “I’ve got something to do, something that’s going to affect you whether you like it or not; it’ll determine whether or not you can still live your shallow lifestyle.

“But I can’t do it until after my birthday, and I had promised Dumbledore to endure you until then. So be my uncle for once and let them stay!”

Vernon sputtered, the large, throbbing vein in his neck threatening to burst. After some deliberation, Vernon reluctantly gestured to the trio, ordering them into the car. While they loaded their trunks into the trunk of Vernon’s car, Ron whacked Harry on the back triumphantly and whispered, “You sure showed him, mate!”

Harry grinned back. It had definitely been satisfying to fearlessly order his pompous uncle around.

The ride back to Privet Drive was awkward, especially with Vernon glancing at his rear view mirror every few minutes to check and make sure that the teens weren’t doing any “funny business.” It was a huge relief for all the occupants of the car when Vernon gruffly told them to

get out. After they had gathered their trunks, Harry, Ron, and Hermione stepped over the threshold into the tense atmosphere of Number 4, Privet Drive.

Dudley Dursley, who looked like he'd rather be anywhere but in the presence of three "freaks," desperately tried to blend himself in with the rest of the room—a feat made in vain, for Dudley's bulk took up about half the hallway. Petunia's lips were pursed disapprovingly, her beady eyes icy, but Harry could have sworn he detected some flicker of nervousness in those composed eyes. To her right, Vernon placed an arm around his wife protectively, his stance defensive.

"Er . . . hello again," Harry said uncomfortably, trying hard not to squirm under the Dursleys' intense stares.

"I won't be feeding two extra mouths!" Petunia snapped indignantly, her chin raised arrogantly.

Ron's mouth dropped slightly in disgust at the lack of concern for their well being. He knew Harry hated his relatives, and that they were as stupid as Muggles could be—but he had never thought they'd be this hostile.

Hermione, however, attempted to make some sort of peace with the Dursleys, being a Muggle-born herself. "Oh, you won't have to feed us. We've brought some food for ourselves."

It was true. The Grangers and Weasleys hadn't been too supportive at first when their respective children had informed them that they'd be accompanying Harry on a very dangerous quest. Arthur and Molly Weasley had understood a bit better; it was more a matter of Mrs. Weasley being terrified that Ron and her surrogate son, Harry, would be hurt, or killed. But after a lot of convincing on Ron's part, Mrs. Weasley had agreed that Ron should go with Harry; they could help look out for each other. Harry smirked, doubting that she would ever stopped worrying about them; which was why Ron had consented to send his mother weekly owls informing her of their progress and welfare.

Hermione's parents had been more difficult to persuade. She was their only child, after all, and they still weren't very familiar with the wizarding world, even after six years. Hermione told them that she would also owl them, and informed them of the dire need for them to do this, that she would be able to help keep them and the rest of the world safe.

However, that didn't stop their parents from trying to help them in any way they could, whether it'd be advice from Mr. Weasley, or a trunk full of food from Mrs. Weasley and the Grangers.

Hermione fished around her trunk, pulling out a box of snacks her parents had sent them. "Here, would you like some? They're perfectly healthy, sugar free –my parents are dentists, you see."

But her last comment only seemed to infuriate the Dursleys even more. "We have your people working on our childrens' teeth?" Vernon demanded, hatred laced in his voice. Dudley, however, eyed the box of treats greedily with pig-like eyes.

Looking slightly alarmed at Vernon's outburst, Hermione quickly reassured him, "Oh, no, no, my parents are Muggles –non magic folk like you. They're not wizards."

However, as hard as Hermione tried to reassure them, there was no reasoning with the Dursleys. Petunia's expression became darker, and Harry had a suspicion as to why.

"So," Petunia sneered, her thin face contorted in disgust. "You're like her."

"Like who, Mrs. Dursley?" Hermione asked, scrunching her eyebrows together in confusion.

Petunia's gaze settled on Harry. "Like my freak of a sister."

Harry's fists clenched tightly at this, and his knuckles began to turn white. Gritting his teeth furiously, Harry reached into his pocket for his wand, preparing to curse his aunt into oblivion. But before he could do anything, Ron, sensing Harry's anger, had grabbed his arm,

steering him towards the stairs. "C'mon," he muttered quietly. "Don't go having a row just yet . . . you're supposed to stay here, remember?"

Hermione followed them, her face reflecting both repulsion at the Dursleys' behavior and pity for their bigotry. The thump of their trunks was the only audible sound in the house, until Hermione whispered a spell to levitate their heavy burden to the top of the stairs, saving them some trouble and causing outraged gasps from the Dursleys below them.

Once they were safely within Harry's room, Ron set down his trunk with a scowl on his face. "Your relatives are gits," he informed Harry.

Harry had to chuckle at that. "I'd think I would have already noticed that, Ron."

Smiling slightly, Hermione suppressed a yawn. "I'm exhausted, are you?"

"Yeah," Harry said darkly. "Tense family reunions with people who hate you are very tiring."

Ron exchanged a worried glance with Hermione, but silently decided not to press the matter any further. Hermione whipped out her wand and gave it a wave; instantly, two sleeping bags materialized on the floor. She beamed, proud that her non verbal spell had worked efficiently.

"You're going to bed, er –sleeping bag?" Ron asked incredulously. "It's four o'clock in the bloody afternoon!"

"Of course not," Hermione denied calmly. "I'm just getting ready."

Ron stared at Hermione as if she were some sort of foreign beast. "You're mental."

Harry chuckled. At least despite everything that has happened in the past six years, one thing has remained exactly the same: Ron and Hermione still bickered like an old married couple.

His two friends joined Harry on his bed as they discussed carefree subjects. Ron made fun of Harry's cousin and proceeded to imitate Dudley trying to hide from them, puffing his face out in an attempt to make it as plump as Dudley's. Ron didn't even come close. Harry talked about Quidditch, and Ron suggested a fly around Privet Drive. Hermione immediately shot down that idea, pointing out that this neighborhood was filled with Muggles. "Do you want to get caught?" Hermione had asked exasperatedly.

Not for the first time, Harry was immensely glad that his two best friends would be joining him. He tried to put on a brave face, and he knew it was his responsibility to find the Horcruxes and defeat Voldemort. At the same time, Harry couldn't help but feel apprehension and fear of what was to come. In reality, this burden has been on his shoulders ever since Voldemort murdered the parents he never knew; he just found out the fine print a year ago. If he succeeded, then he was fulfilling his purpose in the Wizarding World, the job that had been unknowingly assigned to him his whole life. If he failed . . . then history would remember him as the Boy-Who-Failed, the wannabe hero who had crushed their hopes and broke whatever promise he had supposedly made when entering their world.

But most of all, he was scared of who Harry Potter would be when the battle was over. Would he be dead, just another fallen name on a gravestone, or would he be alive, but not really living? Would he cease to be the Harry Potter those at Hogwarts knew him to be, and become some kind of monster like Voldemort, or would he decline into a shell, pushing everyone he knows and loves away from him?

Would this war, his duty, break him?

Harry wasn't afraid of backing out at the last minute. He knew that he would finish this in honor of all those who fell in the fight against Voldemort. It was the aftermath that brought chills to his spine. After all, he had faced Voldemort before, and survived. But each time, Harry felt himself change, even if a little bit, his innocence stripped away little by little.

He didn't want to merely be the ghost of Harry Potter when it was all said and done.

Ron and Hermione had always brought out the best in him, and were the ideal people to help Harry. Professor Dumbledore had said that Harry's greatest strength was his ability to love; he sincerely hoped that would still be there after their quest was over. Harry smiled as he recalled their discussion about Ron and Hermione coming with him. He hadn't wanted them to come; he didn't want them to get hurt, and because of that fear, Harry had wanted to do this alone. Nevertheless, they didn't leave him, and Harry was grateful for that.

Not surprisingly, the Dursleys hadn't bothered them at all, and the sky outside was soon streaked with blue and orange. Finally, they retired to their beds –or in Ron and Hermione's case, sleeping bags– and fell asleep.

Harry fell asleep easily, grateful for the ease of what had once been so difficult. Sighing in satisfaction, he allowed himself to become immersed in the satisfying quiet of slumber.

"Harry! Harry, wake up!"

Murmuring into his pillow, Harry just turned around and tried to block out the voice. He wasn't ready to be awake yet. "Just a few more minutes, Hermione. . ."

There was a slight pause before the female voice responded. "Who's Hermione, your girlfriend?" she said teasingly.

Harry mentally rolled his eyes. Of course it was Hermione; who else could it be? It was too early in the morning and he was far too groggy to accurately place the voice, but logically, it must be his bushy haired friend. Definitely isn't Aunt Petunia, Harry thought, smirking with amusement. And the girlfriend dig was definitely Ron's idea –that must be why there was a pause.

"Really funny," Harry said a little louder, making sure Ron could hear too. "Bloody hyenas, you lot are. Seriously, let me go back to sleep;

don't want to be tired when we go down and face the wrath of Dursley —"

"Dursley? You mean Vernon, Petunia, and Dudley?" Hermione asked, this time with a note of confusion.

Harry was starting to get a little annoyed. Joke's over. "Yes, Hermione, those Dursleys."

"Why do you keep on calling me 'Hermione'?"

Rolling around to face her, Harry said, "Because you are —"

He stopped in mid-sentence. Harry's tongue froze when he saw, not Hermione, but a girl with flaming red hair sitting on the edge of his bed. But what really shocked him was the fact that the girl looked so much like his mother; at least, judging from the photos he had of his parents. The only major difference that Harry could see were bright hazel eyes instead of the green he possessed.

Quickly, Harry groped behind him for his glasses and wand, only to find himself reaching in thin air.

"Looking for these?" the girl asked, holding both items in her hands. She had apparently gotten them from the bedside table . . . on the other side of where it normally was. Harry snatched both items, thrusting his glasses on and pointing his wand at the girl, who looked startled at Harry's hostile behavior.

She didn't look dangerous. But Harry had learned first hand not to judge a book by its cover —literally. The incident in his second year with the diary Horcrux was enough to make him wary of appearances.

"Harry, what's wrong?" the girl asked, sounding panicked at the hard look in Harry's eyes.

"Who're you?" Harry growled, forgetting that he wasn't wearing anything but boxers. He stood up so that he was in front of the girl, at an advantage in an offensive position. His thoughts wandered to Ron and Hermione. Where were they? And where was he? This was

definitely not in Number Four, Privet Drive; the room was completely different! It was filled with wizard items, from Quidditch posters to a bookcase full of volumes on spells. Harry scanned the strange room with wild eyes, hoping to Merlin that his friends were okay –

The girl looked at his shirtless body with a wrinkled nose. “Put on a shirt or something, Harry! I don’t need to see all that. Hermione, maybe, but for me, that’s gross.”

“Answer the question!” Harry demanded sharply, making the girl jump.

She was starting to look a little concerned. “You really don’t know?”

Before Harry could utter another impatient demand, the door behind him swung open. Harry instinctively leaped to the side, allowing him to keep an eye on both the girl and the newcomer. But the person that strode in was the last person he’d expected. Harry had anticipated a Death Eater, Voldemort, Uncle Vernon, not –not –

Sirius Black walked in breezily, ignorant of the tension in the room. He spotted the red haired girl sitting on the bed and affectionately ruffled her hair, causing her to squeal in protest. “Uncle Sirius!” she whined indignantly, which only caused Sirius to laugh with aching familiarity.

Uncle Sirius? Part of Harry’s brain registered, but the majority of him was frozen stiff in shock, and the wind seemed to have been knocked out of him. Sir –Sirius was alive; he was here . . . it couldn’t be. The laugh was Sirius’s, the movements were Sirius’s, and the eyes were Sirius’s. Harry’s mind flashed back to that horrible day, and he felt helpless as his mind replayed the image of Sirius falling back and disappearing behind the veil, slowly and gradually.

His grip on his wand slackened, and it finally slipped through his fingers and onto the rug.

The sound turned Sirius’s attention onto Harry, whose eyes widened even more. His legs felt terribly unstable and wobbly; they were sure to collapse beneath him at any second. Oh, Merlin, what would Harry have given a year ago for something like this to happen, to see Sirius

again, healthy, happy, and whole. He could feel his heart beating fast and hard against his chest, sure that the other occupants of the room could hear it clearly.

But it couldn't be Sirius; it just couldn't! Sirius was dead; Harry had spent so long trying to tell himself that. Why, when he had finally accepted that his beloved godfather was truly gone, would Sirius appear, when he would most likely disappear and break Harry's heart again? He couldn't bear it if he lost his godfather for the second time . . . especially on top of Dumbledore's recent death by Snape's traitorous hand. It was funny; Snape despised the Marauders, including Wormtail, but in the end, he committed the very crime that rat had done, and murdered the man he had trusted him, given him an undeserved second chance . . .

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Harry decided that this Sirius was a trick, a ploy to weaken his defenses. It was a low blow, therefore meaning it was something Voldemort might do.

"And here's the birthday boy!" Sirius boomed as he enveloped Harry into a familiar and comforting hug. Harry told himself to push this false Sirius away, to resist the urge to cling to his godfather forever . . . but his resolve failed. He found himself welcoming Sirius's strong arms and his familiar scent, which, not too surprisingly, always possessed a hint of dog.

Wait, 'birthday boy'? Harry thought, But my birthday isn't today . . .

"Better get changed, then, Harry," Sirius said cheerfully, hitting Harry heartily on the back. "Everyone's waiting downstairs."

"Everyone?" Harry asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

However, the glare was missed on Sirius, who misinterpreted Harry's question. "Oh, don't worry, they're not all here yet. We're still waiting on Remus and your dad. I think he said something about getting some Firewhiskey for you –becoming a man and all, you know." Sirius grinned at him proudly.

Harry felt his heart skip a beat at the mention of his father. Was this some kind of weird illusion where all the dead suddenly came to life again? But Harry didn't know the red haired girl, and Remus isn't dead –

This was just too overwhelming.

Sirius frowned when he noticed Harry's wand on the floor. Gingerly picking it up, he handed the wand to Harry, who was still looking at Sirius in disbelief, as if he wasn't sure if he was really there.

"You look like you've just seen a ghost," Sirius chuckled.

Harry didn't answer. He found his eyes averting towards the red head still sitting on his bed, expecting her to say something to "Uncle Sirius" about Harry's hostile behavior earlier. But she merely stared determinedly back at Harry and said nothing.

"Well," Sirius said, breaking Harry's thoughts. "We'd better get out of here and let Harry get ready." He turned around and began to walk out, pausing at the doorway. "You coming?" he asked the girl, who nodded and, with one last worried glance at Harry, closed the door behind her.

At first, Harry merely stood there in silence before sitting heavily on the bed, the springs groaning in protest. He laid back and stared at the ceiling for a minute, wondering where the hell was he and what was he doing there. It had to be some kind of trap, what else could it possibly be? But Sirius was just so . . . Sirius that it made Harry doubt that theory. Sighing, Harry decided that he'd play along for now, do a bit of digging about this place. He opened the closet and to his surprise found a lot of clothes. Just as he finished changing, something hit him.

. . . we're still waiting for Remus and your dadHe'd noticed it before, but with the shock of seeing Sirius, Harry hadn't really given it as much thought as he should have. Releasing the breath he hadn't realize he was holding, Harry realized that when he went downstairs, he would see people that he didn't know, save for some photos and stories, people that he hasn't seen alive in sixteen years.

Downstairs in this strange house, Lily and James Potter would be waiting for the birthday boy.

Harry didn't think he was ready to see his parents, especially if this was just an illusion the Death Eaters had orchestrated. Still, Harry wasn't sure how they could have gotten Sirius' personality so accurately. Even if they did have Bellatrix, he'd gotten the impression that they hadn't known each other very well. Or maybe they did. He really hadn't known much about Sirius's time at Grimmauld Place, had he?

Carefully, Harry pocketed his wand, keeping it in easy reach. Whether or not the people downstairs looked like family, he would be ready and wary of them.

But what had confused him the most was the way the redhead had looked at him when she entered, almost as if there was something wrong with him and not the world. Still, why hadn't she said anything when she had the chance?

He felt indifferent to his shaking hands. Bringing them up to eye level, he watched the twitching muscles, remembering how his friends had writhed in pain, agony he had brought upon them by bringing them there.

They should never have gone to the Department of Mysteries, for so many reasons.

He brought one hand to grip the other, trying to make the trembling stop, willing himself to calm down. After a few minutes he noticed the shaking cease and wiped his wet palms on the unfamiliar jeans.

Harry closed his eyes and dared to wish that Hermione and Ron would magically appear in front of him, so they could face this together, like they had planned. Here he was, by himself in this strange, yet somewhat familiar room, thrust into something he was not prepared to face –but isn't that what he had wanted? They didn't deserve to shoulder this burden, the one he was supposed to face alone.

To be honest, he would prefer to face Voldemort than walk down those hollow stairs, past the place where a cupboard should be and

into a living room that probably would not contain the porcelain cat that always seemed to watch Harry with its frozen eyes wherever he went, reminding him of his freakishness.

Exhale.

He descended the steps slowly, freezing once when he heard Sirius's bark-like laugh. Shaking himself out of his stupor, Harry cautiously approached what he assumed to be the living room, listening hungrily to the laughter and talk. Forgetting himself for a moment, he was content to lean against the wall and absorb the unfamiliar atmosphere, this rare joy that seemed so limited lately.

This shouldn't be hard. It was just Sirius and his long dead parents, after all.

He exhaled in frustration. How the hell was he supposed to defeat Voldemort when he couldn't even walk into a room? Granted, it was a room full of people who were supposed to be dead, but still –

"Harry, is that you out there?"

Frowning, he placed himself in the middle of the doorway, severely tempted to make a run for the unbarred door. "Er –I guess."

A woman with familiar eyes looked up at him, smiling brightly. He knew this woman. How could he not, when he saw those same eyes every time he looked in the mirror?

"Mum."

Lily Potter pointed to the armchair next to her. As if on autopilot, Harry's legs carried him across a room of ghosts and into a chair that seemed to welcome his weight with a gentleness Aunt Petunia's cushions never quite managed. He couldn't help but stare, wondering why no one had ever mentioned that they shared more than green eyes.

He recognized the cheekbones, the tiny quirk of the right side of the lip, little things people normally did not connect. Perhaps Lily and

James Potter were starting to become as fuzzy to everyone else as they've always been for Harry, just vague memories and pictures, frozen in time to forever dance amongst the leaves.

Lily startled him by running a perfectly solid hand through his hair affectionately. "You're a lost cause," she said with a wistful smile. "I could never for the life of me get your or your father's hair flattened. Thank Merlin Violet didn't inherit that particular gene."

Violet?

Lily turned away from her son and towards Sirius and the redheaded girl. "Harriet! Come over here!"

The redheaded girl scowled and dragged her feet towards them. "Mum," she whined, "don't call me that!"

He blinked. Mum?

"Why not, Violet? It's a perfectly nice name."

Violet scoffed. "It's disgusting, practically Harry's name."

"You know, your Dad and I came very close to having Harry and Harriet," Lily added.

"Thank Merlin you didn't," Violet muttered. "It'd be horrible, we'd get teased so much, wouldn't we Harry?"

"Uh –"

"Blink. You look like a toad."

"No," he snapped, remembering frilly bows and pink cardigans. "You don't –"

"I would've killed James if he had put you two through that humiliation," Sirius interrupted. "Almost like poor Dora; I still don't know what Andromeda had been thinking."

Harry tore his eyes away from his deceased godfather, for a moment forgetting that none of this was real. He couldn't help but wonder if Sirius was Violet's godfather too. He scrutinized his so-called "sister" carefully. She looked like she was a couple of years younger than him, fifteen maybe?

"Which is why we decided to go with 'Violet' instead of 'Harriet'. Can't break the Evans flower girl tradition, can we?"

However, her daughter's response was interrupted by rustling outside of the room. Abandoning her argument, Violet raced to the door and ran into the arms of James Potter. "Daddy!"

He smiled and moved the big brown bag he was carrying out of the way, revealing a softly smiling Remus behind him.

"Got the firewhiskey!" James announced, holding the brown paper bag up high.

Harry should have expected this. Of course the illusion would not be complete without his father –or the Death Eater impersonating him. But he wasn't ready, not at all. The man beaming at him had more severe, aristocratic features, but he still bore an immense resemblance to his son, except for the hazel eyes. Violet's eyes.

What a cheap parallel.

James's gaze fell on Harry, and he grinned mischievously. "Remember when you were five and decided to raid the alcohol cabinet?"

"N –no."

These people had sacrificed their lives for him; he couldn't believe they would be discussing firewhiskey misdemeanors at a time like this. But his father kept on talking as if he had not been interrupted. "Well, I suppose this is a much more appropriate time."

Lily made a face. "This doesn't give you permission to binge, mind. It sets a bad example for Violet, and for obvious reasons."

Sirius winked at Harry from behind his mother, rolling his eyes.

Remus remained quiet as he leaned on the wall, smiling serenely and watching them bicker; his passivity was a strange comfort to Harry, anchoring him to something he knew. Still, wouldn't they have attacked already if they were Death Eaters? Even the satisfaction of baiting Harry with the family he never had should not have lasted as long as this.

This must be a dream; what other explanation could there be?

Harry pinched himself, and was so surprised to feel the pain that he yelped out loud.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Lily asked immediately.

"Nothing, Mum."

He could have kicked himself. Was he really that easy to draw in?

Lost in the muddle of his thoughts, he didn't catch Violet staring at him strangely, hazel eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"You're in my armchair," James said. "You're too big now to sit on my lap, so up!"

"C'mon, James, it's his birthday." Sirius laughed. "It's not as if he's going to puke all over your precious armchair; the poor piece of furniture has already taken enough abuse from you. What else could Harry do?"

Remus chuckled, which turned into a fit of coughs when James turned around towards him indignantly, looking wounded. "You too, Remus? Merlin, the kid has you lot wrapped around his talented Quidditch skilled fingers." He ruffled his son's hair affectionately, frowning when Harry edged away from him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

His father reached into the brown bag and pulled out a bottle of firewhiskey. "Drink up!" James said cheerfully, thrusting the bottle into Harry's wary hands. They must be hoping to get him drunk and passed out, but wouldn't a Stunner be simpler?

Harry scowled. There was no way that was going to happen. Hesitating with the bottle, he tried to think of a way to dance around it. "Er –how 'bout cake first?"

"Your birthday," James said, shrugging.

Violet frowned. "But you've been talking about this for monthsNot that it'd matter," she added, eyes twinkling mischievously, "since you've been sneaking firewhiskey from Hogsmeade with the rest of the Quidditch team!"

Harry stared. "No I didn't."

Still, Lily rounded on him, her voice sharp and underlined with anger. "Is this true?"

He could only shrug indifferently, but apparently it was the wrong thing to do.

"HARRY JAMES POTTER!" she roared, but Harry only sat there blinking at her, slightly stunned. It's not like he wasn't used to being yelled at; his aunt and uncle had eagerly dealt out punishments and lectures multiple times a week before he'd had the threat of a mass murderer godfather looming over their heads. However, having the source of the yelling be your deceased mother was an entirelydifferent matter.

She snatched the firewhiskey out of his hands and thrust it back at her husband. "If it wasn't your birthday, you'd be grounded," she said, this time calmer. "But no firewhiskey, do you understand me?!"

"Yes," Harry said meekly, distinctly reminded of Mrs. Weasley.

The three Marauders winced in sympathy for Harry. Each and every one of them had been on the receiving end of one of Lily Potter's

angry outbursts at least once before; every day for three years in James's case.

He couldn't think. They must be Death Eaters, but their actions weren't making any sense. Despite his suspicion, Harry had to admit that they had done a good job. If he hadn't known any better, he would have thought all of this was real.

They didn't seem to pose an immediate threat to him; perhaps it'd be best to follow their lead and collect information while they feel safe, their deception undiscovered. Still, he felt a stab of guilt about this plan. He had to admit that there was some selfish motivation for this course of action, but he refused to let that deter him. It seemed like a good plan; it didn't matter that it allowed him to see Sirius, alive and laughing, and Remus, younger and devoid of half the worry lines his real self had. Illusion or not, this seemed to be a much happier place.

Harry wondered if the Prophecy existed here.

Lily went back into the kitchen to get the cake, casting Sirius and her husband warning looks. "Don't you dare give him any firewhiskey, not a sip!"

"I'll help you," Violet said quickly, following her mother to the kitchen.

After casting Violet a strange glance, Lily nodded and waved her into the kitchen, leaving Harry with the three Marauders.

Once they were safely in the kitchen, away from prying ears, Lily rounded on her daughter. "What's going on?" she demanded. At Violet's stunned look, Lily sighed. "Let's not dance around it. What did you need to talk to me about?"

"It's about Harry," Violet said quietly. "I'm worried that he's –er– forgetting things."

"Forgetting what?"

"This morning, when I went to wake him up, he reached for his glasses and wand on the opposite side of where his bedside table is.

But that's not what I'm really worried about. Once he got a good look at me, he acted like he didn't know me, and pointed his bloody wand at me!"

"He threatened you?"

Violet nodded. "He recognized Sirius though. Still acted weird around him. When he walked in, Harry looked as if he'd just had the biggest shock of his life, like he was seeing a ghost or something. Do you think he's still having side effects from before, that Quidditch injury?"

Frowning, Lily turned to Violet. "Speaking of Quidditch, you aren't drinking firewhiskey with the rest of the team, are you?"

"No!" Violet said quickly. "It's only the six and seventh years on the team. Harry refused to let me go."

Grunting in acceptance, Lily pulled out the cake. "Well, if he doesn't recognize anybody, why hasn't he said anything?"

"I think he recognized you, Dad, and Uncle Remus."

Lily remembered the strange way Harry had looked at her, almost as if it had been the first time he'd ever seen her. The way he'd called her "Mum" –she should have seen it. "I'm not sure what's going on, but let's let him enjoy the birthday, and we'll take him to St. Mungo's for an examination tomorrow, okay? Don't worry."

"Harry!"

Loud, agonized screams echoed from the living room, followed by James's frantic voice. Both women dashed back, cake forgotten, and arrived at a disturbing sight.

Harry was on the ground, writhing in pain and scratching at his forehead brutally, a hoarse, animalistic kind of scream Lily hadn't heard since the old days, when Voldemort had overrun England the first time. Lily gaped at the sight, terrified when she saw the crimson blood trickling down Harry's face, thick and startling. The three Marauders were desperately trying to hold him down, with James

managing to wrench Harry's hands away from his forehead, his son fighting him all the way. It took all of his strength to keep Harry from hurting himself any more, but after a few more seconds of struggle, Harry became still.

The rest of the adults cautiously approached a heavily breathing Harry, his face ghastly pale and dripping in sweat, stormy green eyes crazed and unfocused.

"Harry?" Violet squeaked.

"Give him some room," Lily said, softly cupping Harry's face in her hands. She could feel herself trembling; it took every bit of her Gryffindor courage to keep the terror out of her voice. But her son merely stared through her, as if she wasn't there, and closed his eyes, his body suddenly becoming limp in James's arms.

James put an arm under Harry's legs and shakily got to his feet, lifting his thin son like a rag doll. "I'll Apparate him to St. Mungo's," he said quietly, his eyes reflecting a fear that rarely graced the usually confident James Potter.

The rest of the group nodded in silent agreement, and with a faint pop, all except Violet and Lily were gone.

"Mum, what'll happen to Harry?"

Lily didn't look at her. "I don't know, Vi."

Doing the only thing she could, Lily grabbed her daughter's hand, squeezed it reassuringly, and Apparated to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

When they arrived, they found Remus waiting for them. "They've taken him up to the Emergency Ward," he said softly, turning around and leading the way silently. Remus's face had been devoid of emotion, increasing the unease deeply settled in Lily's chest. Remus was never one to express much emotion, but she knew him well enough to know when her friend was afraid, and smart enough to know she would be a fool not to be.

They found both James and Sirius waiting outside a ward, Sirius sitting down on a chair, eyes glazed, while James paced up and down the corridor, the rigidity of his posture contributing to his feet's sharp pivots back and forth along the tiles.

"What's wrong with him, Dad?" Violet asked, straining to keep the panic out of her voice. "Why was he clawing at his forehead like that?"

James sighed and finally stopped pacing. "I don't know," he said tiredly. "We just got here. A Healer is checking up on him now."

Silence swept over them as they waited for what felt like an eternity in the ward, the halls eerily silent and foreboding.

"Harry's going to be fine," Sirius muttered, squeezing his niece's arm. "He's hit enough goal posts and survived too many Bludgers to be not okay now."

The aged door creaked open, causing them to spring up from their chairs, attempting to read the expression on the Healer's impassive face.

"He's stable and resting peacefully now," the Healer said. "We're not sure exactly how it happened, but it seemed like something overloaded his brain to the point of agony or caused nightmare-like delusions that –"

James scowled. "In other words, you have no idea what's happened to him."

"Can we see him?" Sirius asked.

The Healer nodded. "Feel free, but he won't wake up for a while. I'll be back later to check up on him."

However, the moment the Healer's echoing footsteps faded around the corner, an intern came dashing through the door. "Is there a James Potter here?"

“That’s me. What is it?”

“There’s an owl outside with a note for you from the Ministry; it looks pretty important,” the intern said breathlessly. “Owls aren’t allowed inside the wards so you’ll have to go out there. It won’t let me remove the note.”

James nodded. With one last worried look behind him, he followed the intern.

Without another word, those remaining walked into the ward, either sitting or kneeling beside Harry. Lily put her hand in his and gave it a squeeze, still shocked from seeing her son convulsing on the floor so fiercely, so terribly. Shuddering, she hoped that it was a one time incident –this can’t happen again.

Harry stirred, turning his head to the other side, near Sirius, whose eyes widened as he saw Harry’s eyes open slightly. The normally clear green was cloudy and unfocused, in a fog of nightmares and memories.

“S –Sirius?”

“Yeah, Harry, it’s me,” Sirius said gently. Violet made a move to join Sirius, but Lily stopped her with a shake of her head.

Harry laughed weakly, eyes blurred with tears. “No, it can’t be you – you’re dead. Am I dead? Did –did Voldemort get me?”

The other occupants of the room exchanged bewildered glances at each other, their minds swimming with questions and worries. Violet caught her mother’s eye, reminding her of their unfinished conversation in the kitchen.

“No, Harry, I’m right here; I’m fine.”

“B –but I saw you! I saw –I saw you fall through the veil...” Harry murmured softly.

“Veil? What veil?”

But before he could question Harry further, Harry’s eyes closed and he fell back into unconsciousness.

“Padfoot?” Remus said. “What’d he say?”

Sirius sighed. “I don’t know. Harry said that he saw me fall through some veil, but that doesn’t make any sense. Last time I encountered a dangerous piece of cloth was when my mother threatened to strangle me with the curtains.”

Just then, James returned, a piece of parchment clutched in his weary hands.

“What’d the Ministry want, James?” Lily asked calmly. No need to alarm James yet with the strange things Harry had just said

“Death Eater attack, about twenty minutes ago. They want all Aurors to go in and help.” He hesitated, unwilling to deliver the worst news. “They say that Voldemort is there.”

Involuntary shudders chilled the room as the adults caught each other’s eyes and avoided Violet’s. Both Lily and Sirius got up reluctantly; but as Aurors and members of the Order of the Phoenix, they had a duty to try and help.

Lily cast a worried look back at Harry, then met Remus’s eyes.

“Don’t worry, Lily, I won’t let anything happen to Harry or Violet,” Remus assured her. “I’ll be right here. Can you make my excuses?” He couldn’t leave them by themselves.

“Let’s check up with the Order first,” Sirius suggested.

Nodding, the three Aurors Apparated to Number 12 Grimmauld Place with a loud pop.

Frowning, Remus turned back to Harry, pondering the strange timing of Voldemort’s attack and Harry’s spasm. But he merely shrugged it

off, Remus tried hard to not think about it. It was preposterous, really; it was just a coincidence –or so the werewolf tried to convince himself. Unfortunately, he could not shake that ominous feeling, and was left more worried than ever.

Harry was dreaming. Or had he always been dreaming? He couldn't tell; in the feverish haze of his mind, he couldn't tell top from bottom, right to left. He didn't know how long it'd been, but it felt like an eternity. All he could hear and feel was another's pain, accompanied by Voldemort's sadistic delight, an emotion that violated his bones. If he could think clearly, he might have wondered why he wasn't just seeing this through Voldemort's eyes like he normally did.

But it didn't really matter at the moment. His current concern was the fact that he was trapped in a man's mind, experiencing his agony, and his corporeal body unable to scream along with him.

"Scream."

"Please –I'll do anything –"

"Crucio."

Harry collapsed onto the ground, gritting his teeth together as invisible knives cut through his skin, his blood, his bones. Mind-numbing pain seized his nerves as they cried out in protest, liquid fire igniting his entire body.

Viciously, he bit onto his lip, holding back the scream that was clawing its way out of his throat. He was surprised to be able to taste the bitter, sour blood in his mouth through the pain. His eyes watered and tears flowed freely as the last shred of his self restraint and sanity began to fade away from his fingers, grasping desperately at the pavement.

At last, he could hold it in no longer. A screeching, almost inhuman sound burst out of his throat until he had screamed his throat raw. A part of him registered the curse being lifted, but the pain was so much, he needed to scream, needed to have himself heard in the dark silence of the night.

Fingers twitching, he reached for his wife's golden locks, her roots tinted red.

Unable to hear Voldemort's next words, his vision blaring red all around him, he didn't have time to anticipate the flash of brilliant green light before he found himself back in the haze.

Groggily, Harry tried to summon the strength to rise, to get away from the horrors he had just witnessed. Unfortunately, his body wasn't listening to him, only managing to slowly open an emerald eye. There, he found something impossible –Sirius Black, his godfather, staring worriedly back at him.

I must be dead. His thoughts were hard to grasp, and he found himself forgetting and remembering inconsistently.

He'd always heard stories about heaven, how angels were supposed to greet the newly dead at the gates to ease the transition. It suddenly made sense; that's what Sirius was, why he –but now his godfather was talking, saying something about him being alive. Harry almost choked on his laughter, the unbelievable lengths Sirius went to comfort him. Feeling himself falling into darkness again, Harry informed him of the impossibility of Sirius's words, how he had seen him falling through the veil.

Why did he look so confused?

Harry swiftly glided around the corpses scattered at his feet, indifferent to the Blood Traitors and Death Eaters lying there. Robes billowing behind him with eerie grace, he knew he emulated of power and regality.

He loved it, basking in the sweet stench of death.

With his exceptional sense of smell, he could detect everything from the crisp night air to the burnt bundle of flesh sprawled beneath his feet. He smiled twistedly, still able to feel tingles of pleasure from his latest kill. The rush he always experienced during a slaughter or a particularly enjoyable session was unrivaled by anything. Inhaling the scent of fresh blood, he reveled in it.

“How weak.”

Scanning the area coolly, he lazily directed his wand behind him, sneering, “Avada Kedavra,” and smirking in satisfaction when he heard the muffled thump of a corpse falling to the ground.

At least Dumbledore’s lot and the Ministry have something in common, he thought in disdain, laughing at the fool trying to sneak behind him. He himself may be a Dark Wizard, but at least he had the courage to look both enemies and fear in the face.

Eyes searching the seemingly forlorn street, he was pleased to see another Dark Mark joining the myriad others floating forebodingly in the sky.

He heard a pop, and was disgusted to see known members of the elite Order of the Phoenix Apparate in front of him. He smirked.

They were no threat, and they knew it; their numbers have declined severely since they last met.

Glancing up at a sky alit with ghostly Dark Marks, he reached up beneath the left sleeve of his robes and touched the original. Seconds later, his Death Eaters answered his call.

He noticed that three people, adorned in Auror robes, were slightly ahead of the others, leading the group. He instantly recognized two of them with a knowing smile.

“Ah. The Potters.”

Remus and Violet watched Harry with tired eyes. Despite the comatose boy’s complete stillness before, his eyelids had briefly started twitching violently as his facial features contorted into an expression Violet really didn’t want to know the cause of.

“Is Harry going to die?” Violet asked softly.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

“He can’t die. Who’s going to have pillow fights with me? Who’s going to be annoyingly protective? Who’s –”

“Violet.”

“Sorry, Uncle Remus.”

Remus smiled reassuringly. “He’s strong, Vi, like your mum and dad. He’ll make it.”

Despite himself, even his own words couldn’t placate his worries and, judging from Violet’s expression, hers either. Remus closed his eyes, suddenly reminded of how death seemed to constantly surround them in these times. Every happy interval seemed to be broken by the crushed faces of someone receiving news of lost loved ones –but Harry won’t die. He has to believe that, because he’s only seventeen, full of promise and with so much ahead of him. He wanted so badly for this war to be won so that the next generation doesn’t have to continue their fight.

Too many lives have been consumed by this war, and he can’t imagine Harry’s generation only knowing fighting, death, and survival. He just can’t. He won’t. He knows too much about suffering to wish that upon anybody.

Violet looked terrible. He knew how important laughter is, and she usually supplied it, but her solemn, blank eyes reminded Remus that no one is left unscarred.

Then again, Remus thought sadly, this is an extreme occasion. She was holding it together extremely well for a girl whose parents had just left on a dangerous mission, leaving her to watch her brother writhe from an unseen force, unsure if he’ll pull out of it completely intact.

It wasn’t fair. Her close friend’s entire family had been brutally murdered by Death Eaters a mere couple of weeks ago, and now this?

Every time someone had asked Violet how she was, she would reply with a huge grin that she was perfectly fine, unfazed by the destruction that plagued their world. But that grin never reached her sad, grave hazel eyes, leaving her parents worried that she would attempt something regretfully brash and stupid.

He placed a hand on her shoulder, and she smiled faintly at him in gratitude, struggling to keep her tears from falling.

Remus, unfortunately, had no comfort but the hope that his nephew would wake up soon.

James, Lily, Sirius, and many other members of the Order of the Phoenix Apparated to the desolate, destroyed street, trying unsuccessfully to resist the chills of fear running down their spines at the sight of Voldemort, his piercing, inhuman red eyes bright with malice.

As James scanned the area, his heart registered with a pang the numerous unmoving corpses around him, mostly Aurors. He recognized many of them, people he'd worked, trained, joked with. It made him sick to his stomach, but it always did. He turned his attention back to this abomination, hating that he'd made loss such a routine.

"Ah, the Potters."

James unconsciously gripped Lily's hand tighter, recalling that moment sixteen years ago, as they learned that either Harry or Neville would have to face a hard destiny. He would always be eternally grateful that Voldemort hadn't chosen Harry, and feel inexcusably selfish for it, but the Potters annually visited the Longbottoms' graves even after all this time. They had sacrificed their lives for their son, just as James and Lily would have been prepared to do if Harry had been marked.

He felt such empathy for Neville; from what Harry told him, the Boy-Who-Lived didn't have many friends at Hogwarts, and was detached from everyone else. Harry had grown up knowing that it could have

been him bearing the scar, and was encouraged by his parents to make a point to greet Neville and talk to him. Harry had definitely made an effort, but according to him, Neville had difficulty opening up, and barely spoke to Harry when he did.

Now, standing in front of him, was the monster that had murdered Frank and Alice, leaving Neville an orphan. James was filled with rage; he gripped Lily's hand tighter. There was nothing more he'd like to do than make sure Voldemort died a very agonizing death.

Unfortunately, that's not going to be up to me. It's Neville's burden.

It didn't seem fair that Neville had to go through so much so young, and lose what should matter to him most before he had it. And to imagine a seventeen-year-old having to face Voldemort alone . . . James didn't know what he'd do if that had been Harry's fate. He loved his family more than anything, and would not have been able to stand it if anything happened to them.

That's why he now stood at the front of the pack defying Voldemort's reign of terror. That's why he brushed aside accusations of being foolish and reckless Gryffindors, knowing that it was what he wanted to do, that it was necessary. Seeing all he had, growing up just as Voldemort's power expanded made running away impossible. He ran his fingers over the smooth wood of his wand, reassured by the surge of magic underneath his fingertips.

As expected, a swarm of Death Eaters Apparated around their master, masked and prepared for a fight.

"Ready, Prongs?" Sirius muttered from the corner of his mouth, his grey eyes fixated on a Death Eater standing next to Voldemort. James's eyes followed Sirius's gaze and recognized the distinct, psychotic confidence of Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Yeah."

He didn't know who cast the first spell, but flashes of red temporarily blindsided James before he recovered enough to shout "Protego,"

and block an incoming curse. A flurry of shouts, cries, and sparks filled the air, igniting a desperate struggle for survival.

Losing all apprehension in the adrenaline of the battle, James gave himself over to instinct, hexing the despicable Death Eaters faster than his brain could register. His honed Quidditch and Auror reflexes helped him dodge spells coming from various sides, but he was too busy to intercept the hex that hit him squarely in the chest.

He staggered backwards, clutching his chest and struggling with the searing pain the curse had inflicted, wheezing heavily. He managed to collect himself and raise his wand, but found himself face to face with Voldemort. Hatred beyond anything he'd ever felt for anyone, even Snivellus, coursed through his veins at the sight of the monster who'd taken so much. In that moment, he'd turned a deaf ear to the screams of agony suffocating the air and a blind eye to Sirius's vicious duel with Bellatrix nearby.

All he could see was that pallid, sunken face sneering at him.

"Crucio!"

James dodged just in time as a Death Eater caught the receiving end of his master's Unforgivable. James grimaced and gratefully tore his eyes off the grisly sight. "Expelliarmus!"

Voldemort lazily blocked the spell.

James spotted Lily's unmistakable red hair dueling with two Death Eaters at once, and Sirius and Bellatrix still circling each other with no indication of either tiring or weakening. But he could also see the majority of the Order taking some hard hits; some were being triple teamed and cornered by the Death Eaters, who, possessed the upper hand. And odds, he realized. James could see it was nearly hopeless; if this carried on any longer, there wouldn't be anyone left to file a bloody report.

He got to his feet and launched a distracting jinx at Voldemort, who was caught slightly off guard due to his attention on knocking an attacking Order member into the far wall. But with a dismissive wave

of his wand, the counter-jinx had rid him of the effects, and focused his attention on James again. James held his wand up as he bellowed various curses at the wizard while carefully blocking or dodging Voldemort's own, knowing well that to be hit with one moment of staggering weakness would result in his death.

An image of Harry, lying in the hospital with Violet beside him, clutching her brother's hand in worry, and Lily, her beautiful green eyes gazing at him with all the love in the world, filled his vision, and James fought back more determinedly than ever.

But the Order was starting to lose their grip on the battle, and the Death Eaters were well on their way to coming out on top. Finally, Moody's harsh, echoing voice filled the night—

“RETREAT! APPARATE OUT!”

James, exhausted, paused to register Moody's words, giving Voldemort an opening.

“Crucio.”

His insides were on fire. The pain seemed to continue for hours until it very suddenly came to a stop. James rolled over on his stomach, sweaty and sore. Summoning the strength he had left, he lifted his head to see a blurry Voldemort staggering off to the side. His eyes focused, and James saw his fellow Auror, Dawlish, lying on the ground directly behind where Voldemort had just been standing, his wand out. He panted heavily, ignoring the blood flowing freely from a nasty head wound. James threw him a grateful look and struggled to his feet, one eye warily on Voldemort.

Quickly, he scanned the area for Sirius and Lily. Lily had spotted him and was running over, throwing occasional curses over her shoulder at her pursuers. Sirius was still fighting with Bellatrix, and James was not going to leave without him.

“Stu —” James began, his wand held up shakily, but was too worn out to continue.

Fortunately, Lily understood what he was trying to do and trained her wand carefully on Bellatrix, shouting, “Stupefy!” The hex reached its mark, and Bellatrix fell to the ground stiffly. Sirius looked surprised and followed in the direction of where the spell had come from. He saw Lily’s frantic gestures for him to Apparate out, but he shook his head, wand trained on his unmoving cousin.

“Padfoot, get out!” James roared, his voice cracking. Sirius glared reluctantly at Bellatrix’s prone form, but disappeared with a pop.

“Let’s go,” Lily said urgently, immobilizing another Death Eater coming at them. “I think everyone else has already retreated –”

“Dawlish,” James said weakly, noticing that he hadn’t left yet.

Unfortunately, Voldemort had noticed this as well, and, infuriated at being attacked from behind and temporarily forgetting the Potters, turned to face the Auror. “Avada Kedavra,” he hissed, eyes flashing, and the Auror’s raised head hit the floor with a sickening thump, his hollow, blank eyes staring at the Potters.

James, knowing that Dawlish’s death would only buy them a few seconds, swiftly seized Lily’s arm and Apparated, taking them away from that nightmare.

A second later, they arrived at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, where nothing short of utter chaos was ensuing. People were running left and right, tending to the wounded or inspecting injuries. Healing Potions and bandages flew through the air, the seriously wounded lying on stretchers to be carried up to one of the bedrooms upstairs for further treatment. Several others, only sustaining minor injuries, stood in solemn silence to wait their turn. A young, miserable looking wizard was talking to various people, a charmed quill scratching on a piece of parchment in midair beside him. James recognized as the wizard responsible of keeping track of who had made it back, who was greatly injured and –James closed his eyes– who hadn’t made it.

Judging from the mournful expression on his face, there had been many casualties or seriously wounded. Dawlish’s empty, dead eyes filled James’s vision, and everything caught up to him. His knees felt

weak, and he began to feel the after effects of both the Unforgivable and the strain from the battle. That's what I get for dueling the most feared wizard alive, he thought humorlessly.

"James!" Lily wrapped her husband's arm around her shoulder, alarmed when she'd felt him slump slightly beside her. "We need to get you to a Medi-Witch."

"No, no –there are others worse off," James said, shaking his head ruefully. "I just need to sit down, that's all..."

"PRONGS!"

The Potters looked up to see a relieved Sirius striding towards them, completely ignoring the protesting Medi-Witch attending to his Bellatrix-inflicted wounds.

"Where the bloody hell have you two been?" Sirius demanded loudly. "I Apparated here and didn't see either of you for a minutes! I thought Voldemort had –had done you in!"

"Calm down, Sirius," Lily snapped, sensing that her husband's impending collapse. "We need to let James sit down somewhere."

Sirius sighed and grabbed onto both of them, Apparating them to an empty guest room upstairs. Together, he and Lily placed James onto one of the beds and sat down beside him. Although James wanted nothing more than to lie there and fall asleep, he resisted it and pulled himself up into a sitting position.

"You know you just Apparated out on a very put off Medi-Witch, right?" James asked, attempting to smile weakly.

Lily sent him an incredulous glare.

Sirius's lips twitched, but he didn't respond, instead asking, "What took you two so long? I almost Apparated back to get you."

James and Lily exchanged pained glances, and Lily sighed, accepting the pleading look in her husband's eyes. "Dawlish was still

there, and before we could take him with us, Voldemort –Voldemort murdered him,” she said quietly. Saying it out loud clarified it, that Dawlish really was dead.

Sirius cast his eyes downwards. He had known Dawlish pretty well; he was a decent person, and a damn good Auror.

“Oh bloody hell,” Sirius said suddenly, realization dawning on him. “What are we supposed to tell his wife and kids?”

“Gina’s an Order member too. Someone has to tell her,” Lily said quietly, horrified at the thought of breaking the news to her. How were you supposed to tell someone that their husband was dead?

“I’ll do it.”

Both Sirius and Lily turned around to face James, who had a tired, resigned expression on his face.

“You don’t have to,” Lily said softly. “We can just tell that bloke downstairs with the list and he can tell her –”

But James cut her off fiercely, “No! No,” he repeated. “It’s my fault he died; I’ll tell her.”

“How’s it your fault, mate?”

James didn’t answer for a moment, instead choosing to stare determinedly up at the ceiling. “I let myself get distracted,” he explained, his shoulders rigid. “Dawlish cursed Voldemort just as he was about to –you know. And Dawlish paid the price. I –I have to be the one to tell her. I owe him.”

For a while, nobody broke the silence that had settled between the three Aurors. Finally, James made a waving motion at Sirius, indicating that he should move out of the way.

“Where’re you going Prongs?”

James didn’t turn around. “To break the news.”

A few hours later, three extremely tired Aurors Apparated into St. Mungo's lobby, hoping to hear some good news about Harry's condition. James hadn't said much after leaving to speak with Dawlish's wife, and Sirius and Lily hadn't pushed the subject. They've all seen co-workers, friends, and acquaintances die in this war, but this particular death seemed to be taking a toll on James.

Lily was worried about him. He was blaming himself when it wasn't his fault, not truly. Dawlish had made a brave choice to help him, and died for it, but James shouldn't take the burden of his death on his shoulders. Merlin knows they already had enough to worry about. Voldemort had killed him –and it was his fault alone. Lily scowled. He'd targeted her son and murdered two of her good friends, leaving their son parentless and carrying the weight of the prophecy on his small shoulders.

Shaking her head to clear her head, they walked into Harry's ward. At first, she could only take in the lack of worry lines on Remus's face, but a bright smile lit her face when she saw Harry sitting up and awake on the hospital bed, his black hair disheveled beyond repair.

"Harry!" She barely noticed the his surprise as she kissed his forehead eagerly. "I was so worried!"

"When'd he wake up?" James asked Remus quietly.

"A couple hours ago, but we only just got here. Violet was hungry, so we went out to grab something to eat." Remus examined his friend carefully. James looked as if he'd gone through hell and back; there was something about James's defeated air that concerned him greatly. Remus made a mental note to ask Sirius what had happened during the Death Eater raid.

Violet waited until her mother had stopped smothering Harry to ask her question. "Mum, are you okay? What happened?"

Lily sighed and let go of Harry, now running her hand through his hair, tousling it further. "There was a big fight; that's all you need to know."

Her daughter frowned, frustrated at the lack of information but didn't press the matter. She knew it had been bad, judging from the scorch marks on her mum's robes and the violent cuts on Uncle Sirius's face. Violet had expected her dad to run over the instant he saw Harry; instead, he hung back with the other two Marauders, unusually subdued.

It must have been a really horrible fight.

"You're all right then, Harry?" Lily asked, still trailing her fingers lightly on his hairline.

"What? Ye –yeah, I'm all right."

But he wasn't. He wasn't exactly sure what he was right now, but it sure as hell wasn't "all right." Having spent a good chunk of the day in a coma, where his thoughts had been hazy and dream-like, he had expected to wake up with a worried Ron and Hermione hovering over him, debating whether or not they should whack him with a stick in an attempt to wake him up.

Harry frowned; he had thought the connection would've ended when the battle was over, but it seemed that Voldemort's elated happiness could last for quite a long time, especially when he went for some stress relieving Muggle hunting afterwards, knowing the Aurors and Order were too preoccupied tending to their wounds to even attempt to stop him.

Harry glanced over at his father and felt a guilty knot in his stomach. Of course, he hadn't been the one to perform the Unforgivable on his dad, but he had seen it all through Voldemort's eyes, and had, in a way, been there when it had happened. He knew it was illogical, but he had felt Voldemort's pleasure as he tortured his dad, and –he couldn't even think about it anymore. Instead, his thoughts wandered to when he'd actually woken up from the coma.

It had really hit him in that moment, as he jolted up from his laying down position, and took in his surroundings –Remus sleeping on a chair next to his bed, and a familiar red haired girl he had at first mistaken for Ginny (Ginny . . . Merlin do I miss her, Harry thought

with a pang) sitting on his other side, that this really wasn't a dream. He really was stuck in this world.

Well, either that, or he was going clinically insane.

Harry started to panic. His parents were alive, alive, and he had a sister! He frowned; he was –well, he didn't really know how he felt, but he wasn't reacting to his parents as strongly as he had when Sirius had waltzed through the door like nothing had changed, like he hadn't died. He met his mother's concerned gaze.

He didn't know them. He supposed he unconditionally loved them, or at least their memories, he didn't love them like he loved Sirius.

To him, Sirius was real, more than a faint memory or a story he had heard. Honestly, the only emotion that registered with him was shock and wonder that they were alive, but those feelings were nothing compared to the heartbreak of seeing Sirius again.

Nevertheless, it was overwhelming to see his parents, dead of seventeen years, in front of his very eyes. It was uncomfortable yet comforting to feel his mother's hand stroking his hair, not caring that she was making it messier. Harry was torn between wanting to hold on to them and never let go, a privilege he had never experienced, and running away as fast as he could.

He was scared. How was he supposed to act around them? He had no idea what they were like, what they did for a living. The only sure fact was that they were still in the Order, like they had been before they'd died. Looking at them now, tangible and skin –Harry could see the strong resemblance strangers were always reminding him about. His father's face, his mother's eyes –he saw reflections of them in the mirror every day.

Unsure of what exactly he was feeling right now –relieved, worried, disbelieving, elated, sad, suspicious, whatever– Harry struggled to control his emotions, and the understandable impulse to run over and hug Sirius in an unmanly way without caring at all. He was alive, and that's all that matters.

Instead, he turned his attention to his still throbbing forehead, rubbing it gently. Frowning, Harry suddenly realized that his scar seemed to be absent from his forehead –but no. It couldn't be; nothing could ever take that curse scar away. He must have merely missed it. Carefully, Harry trailed his finger along his forehead, making sure to cover every single place, and failed to find it.

"The scar," Harry murmured.

"Scar? What scar?" Lily asked as she looked Harry over. Then, looking satisfied, she turned back to her son. "There's no scar here. A few cuts, but no scar, I think."

"Er –can I get a mirror?" He needed to see for himself that it wasn't there.

A scoff came from his other side. Harry turned around and saw his sister looking incredulous. "You just wake up from a coma, and the first thing you ask for is a mirror? Way to be vain, Harry."

"Violet!" Lily snapped, shooting her daughter a stern look. She took her wand out and, with a wave, conjured up a mirror, handing it over to him.

Harry studied his own reflection carefully, eyes wide. Was it really gone? But if it was, how could he have seen those events through Voldemort's mind? He was connected to him because of the scar; it didn't make any sense at all.

"Ah, good, you're here."

"How long before we can take him home?" James asked quietly.

The Healer sighed. "We can't seem to figure out what's wrong with him, but we'd like to keep him a little bit longer for further examination. Other than that, there's no reason to keep him here –"

Lily turned to James. "What do you think, James?"

Instead of answering, James focused his attention on Harry, whose eyes were pleading with him not to leave him at St. Mungo's. Feeling resigned, James answered, "We'll take him home."

The Healer frowned somewhat disapprovingly, but didn't say anything else. "All right, but if anything like this happens again, take him straight here. If you'll come and sign the release forms, he can be discharged."

Harry sighed in relief. He really hadn't been looking forward to staying in St. Mungo's any longer. Frequent visits to Hogwarts' hospital wing hadn't made him very fond of white, sterile environments. Still, he couldn't help but wonder if going "home" was any better.

Well, we'll just have to see what happens.

Rays of sunlight filtered through the window of Harry Potter's room as he began to stir. Groggily, he opened his eyes, blinking fiercely as he adjusted to the morning light. Not bothering to put on his glasses, Harry laid there in that unfamiliar bed, staring up at the white ceiling, smiling in amusement when he saw a somewhat blurry wizard poster of England's national Quidditch team.

Bludgers flew about, thanks to the Beaters, and the Seeker executed an impressive loop to avoid one before speeding off to chase the Snitch again. Chasers passed the ball to each other and took turns throwing the Quaffle into the goal hoops, which the Goalkeeper adamantly attempted to save.

Harry watched the live action poster for a couple of minutes before directing his thoughts back to his dilemma. Last night, everything had been muddled and confusing, leaving his thoughts a jumble of theories and suspicions. The only thing he knows for sure is that he doesn't have the liberty of showing weakness, especially in this unfamiliar environment.

Something has to be done; he needs answers, not guesses and speculation. Sirius and Remus were definitely out –they were all a part of this. But who could he trust? Closing his eyes in frustration, Harry cast his mind around, trying hard to think of some solution to all of this. Finally, he found himself staring in his mind's eye at a pair of twinkling blue eyes behind half moon spectacles.

Dumbledore. But the bubble of hope immediately burst when Harry remembered that the Headmaster was dead.

But –if his parents and Sirius were alive, surely Dumbledore would be as well? It'd be the best place to start; Dumbledore was an incorruptible man, and if he can't help Harry, nobody can –

Ron and Hermione. But he wasn't sure where they were in all this. Harry knew he had to get in contact with them, see for himself whether or not they were his Ron and Hermione, and not the Ron and Hermione of this place.

Instinctively, Harry pushed on his glasses and made a move towards where Hedwig would normally reside. When it became clear that there was no cage or snowy white owl, Harry realized that this must be some sort of ripple effect. Hagrid had gotten him Hedwig –he supposed he would have gone school shopping with his parents instead of the Hogwarts gamekeeper.

He sighed. Looks like he'll have to contact his friends through another way –

Harry turned around sharply, grabbed his wand from the bedside table, and pointed it threateningly at the grey owl stationed at the corner of the room, who had hooted loudly to get Harry's attention. Cautiously, wand still pointing at the bird, Harry moved towards what was apparently his owl, surprised that he hadn't noticed it yesterday. But then, he had been more concerned about the fact that Sirius and his parents were alive than what had been in his room.

“Er . . . I've got a message for you to deliver,” Harry informed the owl as it happily perched itself on his arm, leaving his right hand free to write. He figured that Hermione would probably be in France or somewhere else on vacation right now, so Ron would be the better bet if he wanted a quick answer.

Ron,

I've got to talk to you. Reply back quickly.

Harry

He scanned his brief note and deemed it satisfactory. If this was the Ron he knew, then he had a plan. If not –well, he was sure that it wouldn't be enough to make him suspicious or anything. He hoped. After rolling the little scrap of paper up, he placed it between the grey owl's raised talon. “Can you take this to Ron Weasley for me?” The owl hooted and flew up into the air, though it paused in front of the window.

“Oh, sorry,” Harry apologized, opening the window for it. He paused for a moment to watch it glide through the sky, hoping that it’d reach its destination and bring back an optimistic note.

Harry glanced at the clock, noting the early hour. Maybe, with luck, the rest of the house’s inhabitants –he tried not to think of them as family– would be asleep for a few more hours. His resolve strong, he took the time to change before searching every drawer, nook and cranny of his room for the Marauder’s Map.

After a few minutes of incessant, frustrating searching, Harry gave up. He even tried to summon it, but it was nowhere to be found. Dumbledore was most likely at Hogwarts, pacing in his office, taking care of Order business or finding the Horcruxes. Like I should be doing, Harry reminded himself. But not before I figure out what the bloody hell’s going on. The Marauder’s Map would let him know for sure if Dumbledore was at Hogwarts –he’d even take McGonagall. At least she’d be able to give information on the Headmaster’s whereabouts.

Still, even if Harry had seen Dumbledore on the map, he’d still need a way to get into Hogwarts. He didn’t have his Apparating license yet, but he’d managed it at the cave –

He shook the image of the Headmaster’s pain out of his head. That didn’t happen here.

Suddenly panicking, Harry dove his hand into his jeans pocket, searching for what he should’ve known wouldn’t be there. After all, he’s never worn these clothes before. A surge of anger forced him to clench his fists, attempting to reel in his emotions. He laughed bitterly. Wasn’t that what Snape had told him, before he fled like the traitorous, greasy bat –

Harry sighed. Really, he shouldn’t be angry that he had lost the false Horcrux.

But it was a constant reminder of the sacrifices people have made for him.

“Damn it!” He reserved the urge to kick something for the real bad guys, not some poor desk. No; he’d save it for Voldemort, Bellatrix, and Snape.

Harry focused his energies again on finding a way to get into Hogwarts. His mind drifted back to the Apparation idea, but Hermione’s scolding voice in the back of his mind rose to the surface: No, Harry, I’ve told you a million times! Hogwarts, A History specifically says that nobody can Apparate in or out of Hogwarts!

Merlin could he use Hermione now.

But Hermione isn’t here. He could Apparate outside of Hogwarts and find his way in –but how? He couldn’t fly in; he’d only seen the wards down when he and Dumbledore had returned to Hogwarts on broomstick. If he simply knocked or yelled at someone to open the gates, he wasn’t sure anyone would hear him in the vast property.

Sending a letter would take too long, and who knows how long it’ll take Dumbledore to respond? Harry probably wasn’t on his high priority list now that he was no longer the Boy-Who-Lived or The Chosen One. He silently cursed the Daily Prophet and all of the blind leaders of the Ministry, especially the Minister of Magic. It still made his blood boil that they had the nerve, after Dumbledore’s death and treating them both like crap, to ask him to be their poster boy, to support the bumbling, misguided Ministry. Expression contorting in disgust as he thought about the labels he had detested, he wondered wistfully what it’d be like to just be Harry.

He quickly shook those thoughts out of his head, marveling at how off track he could get. After a few more minutes of deliberating, there was really only one thing that would work: floo powder.

The Potters must have floo powder somewhere; with two children unable to Apparate, they had to find a way to get places if they decided against using Side-Along Apparation or had to go somewhere that blocked it, like Hogwarts.

Harry carefully placed his wand in his back jeans pocket, pausing as he remembered Mad Eye Moody’s harsh, panicked words two years

ago: Don't put your wand there boy! What if it ignited? Better wizards than you have lost buttocks, you know!

A smile tugged at Harry's lips at that memory. Constant Vigilance!

Nevertheless, he gingerly took his wand out of his back pocket and into the pocket on his brilliantly red sweatshirt. He couldn't lose any buttocks or body parts there. Harry opened the door, fully intent on tip toeing past the sleeping Potters –

Unfortunately, fate had a different plan for him.

The moment he opened the door and stepped through the doorway, something wet, heavy, and sticky fell on top of him, soaking his entire body in a mass of thick liquid while loud bells sounded from nowhere, alerting the entire household. Soon enough, a stampede of footsteps screeched to a halt in front of him.

"Merlin!" Lily gasped when she saw a Harry-like figure completely drenched in red and gold paint.

James just stared at the sight, noting Harry's still body, still in shock at what had just been promptly dumped on him. A shadow of a mischievous, famous Marauder smile tugged at his lips, something that did not go unnoticed by his wife.

However, someone else did not seem to possess the self-restraint to keep from laughing. A snort came from Violet, who had been standing beside her parents, her face red with effort. She lost the battle and a laugh erupted.

Lily exchanged amused glances with her husband and waited for their daughter's giggles to subside.

Well, Mum always thought the Gryffindor colors flattered you, Harry," Violet said slyly.

"Where did you get the paint?"

She had the grace to look ashamed. "Er –I sort of –well– conjured it."

“And broke the rules again,” James added with a hint of pride.

“You’re not going to report me, are you?”

Meanwhile, Harry had pulled out his wand and muttered “Scourgify” enabling him to see again; what he saw was Violet putting on the world’s best pout –from the exasperated looks on his parents’ faces, it was an old trick.

“I swear, she gets that from you, James,” Lily accused.

James shrugged, but a faint roguish grin lit up his face. “Well, that and my good looks,” he informed his wife in a light, teasing voice, breaking out of the solemn mood that had possessed him the night before.

“Not so good,” Lily retorted, her voice equally teasing. “Remember the first six years of Hogwarts?”

James winced. “Painfully.”

Harry realized that his mum was talking about the years she had loathed James Potter, when he’d been a big headed, egotistic prick who had asked her out every day. With a grimace, he remembered his fear that his father had actually forced his mum to marry him against her will, a fear that Remus and Sirius had been quick to quash. Still, in the back of his mind, there had always been a sliver of a doubt.

Then Harry realized that his plan to sneak off to Hogwarts was ruined. Irritated and annoyed at Violet for playing a prank on him right when he was trying to figure everything out, he resisted the strong urge to hex her. Great; unless he could somehow get everyone else back to sleep, he would have to wait for the next opportunity. Well, that or Ron’s returning letter.

“Why’d you have to dump paint all over me?” he demanded angrily. “What’s next, pots and pans?”

Violet looked taken aback at his outburst. "You've never minded before," she said quietly. But she shrugged it off and continued in a stronger voice. "Everyone was all depressed and stressed out from yesterday; I figured some laughter was needed. Sorry –but it really was a tame prank, you know!" she burst out suddenly, hazel eyes defensive.

Harry sighed. "Fine," he said rather begrudgingly.

Well, he'd better get into the swing of things here, if just to avoid them carting him off to an insane asylum. Maybe he could coax some answers out of them; it was the most he could do right now.

"Why don't you remove the enchantment you have on the doorway, Violet," Lily prodded gently.

"Okay." Violet ran back to her room and grabbed her wand, rushing back to where the rest of her family was waiting. She waved her wand above Harry's head and muttered some incoherent words.

Suddenly, two bells and two empty cans of paint appeared out of nowhere and came crashing onto Harry's head.

"Harry!"

Vision becoming blurry, his head spinning around in circles, Harry staggered and fell to the ground with a mighty thump, blacking out, but not before he had one last thought.

Looks like there's another Marauder in the family.

"I'm really, really, really sorry!" Violet apologized over and over again, looking genuinely stricken. "I didn't mean for everything to fall on you, really!"

"Mm hmm," Harry grumbled, one hand on his head as he glared furiously at her. His mum had removed the large lumps on his head, but he was still nursing a massive headache after the healing. Harry was seriously convinced that someone really wanted him to fail.

A loud clang sounded as plates were placed in front of the two teens, the teeth of their forks sinking deeply into the pancakes.

Harry was surprised to see that their breakfast had been made without magic. But then, Lily Potter was a Muggle born, so maybe he shouldn't be surprised that she had decided to keep some of the traditional normalcy her sister so desperately clings onto. He ignored Violet as she dove straight into her breakfast, instead choosing to watch his parents interact with each other. Figuring that his chance today to seek out Dumbledore was pretty much shot, Harry decided the best thing to do now is lie low and gather information on this end.

Lily was busy flipping over a pancake, smiling contently. James swooped in behind her, gently pulling back her flaming red hair and kissing the nape of her neck. "James!" she admonished playfully.

"What?" he asked, the telltale smirk betraying his innocent expression. James seemed to be in a much more cheerful mood after Violet's prank; he had to admit that the practical joke had garnered the effect that Violet had wanted, albeit at Harry's expense.

"Nothing," Lily grazed her lips with his and, forgetting their children's presence, deepened the kiss.

Harry wrinkled his nose and turned to face Violet, who was staring at her parents with an expression that mirrored his.

"Ew."

That reminded Lily and James that they weren't alone, after blushing furiously, they returned to cooking. But Harry smiled; any doubts about his parents' relationship were wiped from his mind. They both seemed to be very much in love, and even if they were imposters, this fact still comforted Harry somewhat.

After all the cooking was done, the adults sat down with the kids, and they passed around the maple syrup and poured tea into their eager cups. The conversation was subdued in respect for what had happened the night before, although Violet did try to press her parents for information numerous times throughout the meal.

Harry heard tapping sounds behind him, frowning as he turned around to pinpoint the source of the noise –a tawny owl with what looked like a brown pouch and a Daily Prophet. Harry leaned back, fumbled with the latch for a few seconds, and opened the window for the owl, which hooted its gratitude and thrust the wizard newspaper at James. After placing a Knut into the little brown pouch, James took the paper from the owl and gave it a little nibble of his pancake before it went on its way back into the clear, blue, cloudless sky.

James conjured his glasses from nowhere and put them on, opening up the paper and intently reading the front page, frowning deeply.

“What’s wrong Jam –” Lily suddenly putting a hand over her mouth and gagged. Her eyes widened in alarm as she dashed to the bathroom, where distant retching sounds echoed into the hallway.

James stared in the direction where his wife had gone, looking extremely worried. “You two aren’t feeling sick, are you?”

Violet and Harry exchanged glances and shook their heads; he felt fine. James set the Daily Prophet down and traced Lily’s steps to the bathroom. Violet snatched the abandoned newspaper before Harry could. He wanted to wring his hands in frustration; reading the newspaper would help him learn what was going on here.

“Er –can I have that?” he asked as Violet scanned the front page with scrunched eyebrows.

“I got it first.”

“You dumped paint, buckets, and bells on my head.”

Violet looked confused. “So?”

Harry bit back a scream of frustration. Now he had an idea of what Ron had to go through with six siblings. He grew impatient and resolved the situation by simply snatching the Daily Prophet out of Violet’s hands. Ignoring her squeal of protest, he quickly read the

front page, eyes widening at the familiar picture of an uncomfortable looking boy.

The Chosen One: Ally of the Ministry of Magic or Unwilling Puppet?

The Chosen One, also known as the Boy-Who-Lived, has recently been a constant figure around the vast Ministry of Magic, writes Rita Skeeter, the Daily Prophet's esteemed correspondent. Neville Longbottom, who at first had been reluctant to make himself a public figure, has finally relented and now, after the heartbreaking tragedy of last year, decided to move on and join the Ministry in its hunt for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Asked about his past reluctance to cooperate with the Ministry, and the reason behind his change of heart, our honorable Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, answered, "Well, it seems that Neville has realized, after the events of the end of last school term, that decisive action must be taken, and taken immediately. He knows now that working for the Ministry will be in his best interest, and that we have the means to provide him with the best Auror protection available. We will ultimately be of great aid to him in his quest to defeat You-Know-Who." Neville, who has been the object of both ridicule and admiration, only said that "well, in light of [You-Know-Who's return, I have taken it upon myself to save the Wizarding world from such an abomination. I am not just doing it for those who are living in such fear now, but for my parents. Yes, I miss them very much; sometimes I still cry about them when I am alone." Despite everything the boy has gone through, Neville still possesses sensitivity, and a stray tear could be seen as our meeting came to a close. But this reporter was not entirely convinced; after much digging and searching, I have come across overwhelming evidence that this new role may not indeed be a completely voluntary act on young Neville's part. For instance –

An irate Violet reclaimed the paper before he could finish the article, but Harry didn't care. His brain was still spinning from the recent hoard of information he had just received. Neville was the Boy-Who-Lived? That means –the Prophecy does exist, just in the form of Neville Longbottom. Their roles had been reversed.

His stomach sank at the thought of shy, timid Neville facing everything he had faced in his life. Having your parents being tortured

into insanity was bad enough but to have Harry's life, to know that there was someone out there trying to kill you –he just couldn't imagine it.

He frowned. Neville's arrogant quote in the Prophet had not sounded like him at all. But then Harry remembered that Rita Skeeter had been the one who had written that article; she had probably used that bloody quill of hers and twisted Neville's words, or perhaps invented them completely. He couldn't believe she was still writing! But then, if she had never investigated Harry, why would Hermione go looking for blackmail?

Nevertheless, Harry noted that Neville had taken a completely different path than he had, choosing to be the Ministry's poster boy. He wondered what else was different.

Before his thoughts could go any deeper, a loud pop sounded –Harry immediately pull out his wand, pointing it in Sirius Black's face.

"It's okay, Harry, it's just me," he reassured him, gently pushing the tip of Harry's wand down, away from his godfather's face.

Harry let out the breath he had been holding and relaxed while Violet got up and hugged Sirius, asking if he was okay.

"I'm good," he replied, then pausing, adding under his breath. "Sort of."

Violet cocked her head to one side. "What's wrong Uncle Sirius?"

He gave her a small smile and shook his head, "Nothing, just thinking about yesterday and a certain four timing ex-girlfriend who I've wasted a precious year dating."

"Oh," Violet said, her face falling. "I'm sorry, Uncle Sirius."

"Fourtiming?"

Sirius sighed dramatically. "You heard right; Aubrey had three other boyfriends."

“Bad luck, Padfoot.”

Lily and James stood in the doorway, both wearing sympathetic smiles.

“I’m so sorry Sirius,” Lily said gently. “I’d really thought she was the one.”

“Really? I didn’t.”

James rolled his eyes in exasperation. “You’re cursed, Padfoot, I really think you are. You just don’t pick the right people.”

Sirius slumped in his seat, looking defeated. “I know. Look at everyone else, eloping and marrying left and right! And being an Order member and Auror and all –my chances of something happening are pretty high. I’m thirty bloody seven, for Merlin’s sake!”

Upon seeing Violet’s ashen expression, Lily glared at Sirius in warning.

At last, Sirius had sobered up and was now scrutinizing Lily carefully. “You don’t look well, Lils, you alright?”

Lily muttered something about an upset stomach, but Sirius saw the suspicious blush creeping up her cheeks, the defensive way one hand rested on her stomach. “Hold it –”he said, mouth gaping. “My future godchild isn’t in there, is it?”

“What?”

Harry was absolutely stunned; what other curves was this place going to throw at him?

James was the first to recover. “You –you’re p –pregnant?” he stuttered, looking caught between a mixture of elated happiness and extreme anxiety.

“I think so,” Lily said quietly, fidgeting under everyone’s gazes. “I didn’t –I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure.” With that, she glared heatedly at Sirius, who had the grace to look ashamed.

“Oh no,” James said, suddenly looking tired and withered as he collapsed heavily into a chair.

Her face fell. “This isn’t good news?”

James’s raised his head, casting his wife an apologetic glance. “No, it’s great news, it’s just –it’s so dangerous now –”

Apparently, confusion was contagious –this whole day has been strange. Were all these events, all these differences, supposed to do something? There must be some purpose, unless he was just imagining all this. But as hard as he tried, Harry just couldn’t believe that –everything was too real to be an illusion.

He drummed his fingers on the table in a comforting beat, appearing to be in thought about the newest Potter when he was really examining Sirius carefully, watching him for any little tiny out of character reaction. He didn’t find any; everything about him, from the way he scrunched his eyebrows to the confident way he carried himself, was all completely and utterly Sirius Black.

The room was silent for a moment, but for Harry it seemed to drag on for an eternity. The only sounds he could hear were the rhythmic drumming of his fingertips and the ticking of the clock next to the cabinet. Tick, tock, tick, tock.

Harry flinched as a chair screeched across the floor. James had gotten up and embraced Lily, murmuring words of apology in her ear.

“I’m sorry, Lily, I’m happy, I really am! I’m just –”

“Worried?” She smiled sadly.

Sirius coughed. “I hate to be the one to break this up but Scrimgeour wants all Aurors to come to the office to discuss last night; he’s apparently under the impression that he’s still the Head of our

department. Want to know how Dumbledore's secret Order found out about the massacre." He scowled. "I don't see what he's so upset about; everything was going to hell by the time we got there."

This intrigued Harry greatly. "Why would he be so against the Order of the Phoenix?"

"Because it was started by Dumbledore," Violet explained. "And he's never liked him, has he? Scrimgeour's the kind of person who likes to hold a tight leash on everything; Dumbledore founding a secret Order purely made for fighting Voldemort and the Death Eaters implies that the Ministry isn't doing a good job. So basically, he's a little baby who's insulted when the older kids help. Duh, Harry."

"Oh, right." Harry said, realizing that Rufus Scrimgeour was the same everywhere. Then it hit him that Violet had called Voldemort by his name, not You-Know-Who or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. He couldn't help but have a little respect for the immature prankster for not giving in to the fear. But then, perhaps she had just been raised that way.

Harry wanted to ask what would happen if the Minister ever found out that they were Order members, but held his tongue, catching the look Lily sent him. She was starting to get suspicious with his question; he must have asked them this already, and Harry couldn't afford to get trapped in the corner now, not before he found out more.

"We'd better get going." Sirius checked his watch. "We can't afford to be late."

Husband and wife nodded. "You two –don't get into trouble while we're gone, you hear?"

"What could we possibly do?" Violet asked innocently, batting her eyelashes.

James's voice was stern. "No more pranks; I think your brother's had enough for the week."

Just how often did Violet prank people?

He had to solve this mystery somehow. Harry stared at the calm outside the window of the Potter house, knowing that he must get back to what he's supposed to be doing –finishing what he started.

With a quick kiss, Lily rejoined the other two and Apparated to the Ministry of Magic.

The moment they left the room, Harry rounded on his sister. "What would happen if Scrimgeour found out they were Order members?"

Violet looked taken aback by this question. "They'd be fired, probably. And maybe worse, I dunno." She tried to pass the way she said it off with an offhand manner, but he could tell that behind that, she was worried.

Harry poked his pancake, deep in thought. Now that he's been here for a little bit, it was easier to play his part. His strategy right now seemed to be working; he figured he'd stick to it for the moment, although he'd make sure to floo to Hogwarts in the morning. Going at night wasn't a good idea –he wasn't sure if they'd check on him or not– but if he went in the morning, he could pass it off as something else. A nighttime excursion was bound to be more suspicious.

But the truth was, he needed more time to plan, to absorb everything before he confronted Dumbledore, if he was there. As hard as he tried to optimistic about it, he couldn't help but feel like everything was about to spin out of control.

Well, life was full of unexpected surprises.

Sirius fell through the veil. He was thrown backwards so slowly, so gracefully that the fall felt like an eternity to Harry's horrified eyes. His gaze locked on the falling figure –

Maybe, just maybe, Harry could reach him before he disappeared forever.

He ran, forgetting his injuries, the surrounding Death Eaters, Aurors, and friends, hurt, perhaps fatally; right now, all he could see was his godfather beginning to vanish from his sight.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he reached Sirius just in time, but was startled when Sirius's hand reached out and pulled Harry in with him. They tumbled through layer after layer of pure white cloth, the silk brushing against Harry's cheek with deceptive gentleness until gradually, the color began darkening. They soon found themselves surrounded by an assortment of grey swirls, the color tone varying the further along they got; eventually, the darkness engulfed them, and the black veil wrapped itself around Harry and Sirius, marking them with its imprint.

As he was being smothered by the cloth, Harry could have sworn he saw a speck of green in front of his eyes. He opened his mouth to demand the reason why Sirius had pulled them in, but his tongue was silenced as a rush of sharp, frigid air assaulted his face. He looked down, and immediately wished he hadn't.

They were falling for an eternity, two figures cloaked by the shadow of night. Below him was a greenish tint in an otherwise dark sky, which puzzled him greatly.

Sirius!

Don't worry, Harry, Sirius's voice echoed in his head, nothing bad will happen while I'm here. Harry bit his lip, disbelieving; but he trusted Sirius.

After all, what could Harry do while falling from the sky? Wind howled in his ears as he sped up, faster and faster they fell into nothingness. The emerald speck grew larger until its eerie brightness presented

itself as a looming threat. His stomach sank horribly as he recognized the green symbol of terror, the emblem constantly imprinted in his nightmares—

The Dark Mark.

But they merely passed through the floating green clouds. Involuntary shivers possessed his body for a moment, but he stubbornly fought it off and looked down. Green filled his vision as he neared the highest tower. Wincing, he closed his eyes to block the blinding light out. When he opened them, a terrible sight beheld him.

Albus Dumbledore's limp body fell over the railing, his robes —once magnificent— billowing out behind him, his arms stretched out as if soaring. An eagle. A Phoenix.

No!

He was powerless. Still, he knew he couldn't leave him to die. Now that he was falling level with him, Harry desperately grabbed his mentor by the hand, attempting to yank the Headmaster upright again.

Leave him, Harry, there's nothing you can do.

No. I'm not just going to let him die again!

It's his time.

He looked again at Dumbledore's peaceful eyelids. Why?

Because sometimes you just have to be patient and let things run its course, Sirius said, his fierce gaze upon Harry. Remember that.

Before Harry could answer, they hit the ground.

BEEP! BEEP!

Harry Potter awoke with a start, automatically grabbing his wand and pointing it at the darkness. Groggily, he tried to identify where he was; this didn't look like Privet Drive. He absorbed the Quidditch poster,

the bookshelf filled with Wizarding books, and everything came flooding back. Right, so his parents were alive, Sirius was alive, he had a prankster sister, and Neville is “the Chosen One.”

Everything makes sense now.

Scowling at the bright green numbers in the darkness, Harry wondered if another prank was in store for him today –it had definitely slowed down his plans yesterday. He frowned.

What had that dream been about? Let things run its course. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

He felt like he’d been punched in the gut. Why’d he have to dream about the both of them? It wasn’t as if he hadn’t been having enough trouble being trapped in an unknown place. Taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, Harry twirled his wand between his fingers before pointing it at the doorframe. He wasn’t taking any chances of having paint dumped all over him again –

His door swung open. “Oh, good, you’re awake,” Violet said. Harry stole an annoyed glance at the glowing “6:33AM,” wondering why she was up so early. Violet’s eyes followed his, and a slightly concerned look crossed her face. “Don’t you remember what today is?”

“No.”

Violet hesitated. “It’s the anniversary of the Longbottoms’ murders,” she said quietly. “When Neville defeated Voldemort.”

Harry frowned. His parents had been killed on Halloween –why were Frank and Alice Longbottoms’ deaths mourned now? But perhaps this, among other things, was just another difference here.

“Mum says to get dressed, so hurry it up.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Violet spared a moment to stick her tongue at him before slamming the door shut. Harry scoffed.

Sisters.

Checking once again to make sure his wand was securely snug inside his jean pocket, Harry descended the stairs and entered the kitchen, where the rest of them were waiting. He noticed that Lily kept on glancing at the clock nervously every few seconds.

“Oh, there you are Harry. We’ve better go, James, or risk being late.”

James nodded and quickly put on his Muggle jacket before reaching into a drawer for a sack of powder. He handed it to Harry and grabbed a fistful of Floo powder, shouting “Mrs. Longbottom’s house!” and disappearing a flash of emerald flames.

Harry did not feel comfortable with this. He shifted slightly as he allowed Violet to take some Floo powder of her own. In the world he knew, Harry had yet to visit Godric’s Hollow, his parents’ graves; he meant to, right after Bill and Fleur’s wedding, but –this he wasn’t prepared for. The Longbottoms weren’t his parents, and it felt strange just thinking about commemorating people who shouldn’t have died, who should be insane.

He wondered which scenario was worse. Would the Longbottoms or Neville had preferred it if Frank and Alice had died instead of becoming empty shadows of their old selves? If they had the choice, would they have chosen death?

Would Harry’s parents?

Not that it’d matter, since they didn’t really have a choice in the matter, they were murdered, murdered so Harry could save the world and be the cursed Boy-Who-Lived. He clenched the Floo powder sack tightly with his fingers, the mere thought of that fateful Halloween night causing his blood to rise. For so long, Harry hadn’t known a single truthful fact about his parents or known anybody who actually cared that they had died. Perhaps, Harry thought, deep inside her leather heart, Aunt Petunia did love her sister, did mourn for her internally in the privacy of her heart, but he might be wrong.

Still, this would be a good opportunity to extract more information, learn more about the differences of this place compared to the one Harry knew.

Doesn't hurt to think positively, right?

"Harry?" He turned to his mother. "Are you ready to go?"

"Oh, yeah, right," Harry muttered, walking into the fireplace carefully. Soon, he felt himself yanked in that infernally sickening sensation, spiraling through varied fireplaces before tumbling clumsily into a well lit, clean room, its carpet soon to be smudged with soot from a certain Harry Potter.

A slightly familiar woman came rushing over to him, pushing him away from the carpet and onto the safe marble floor. "Don't ruin the carpet!" she snapped, muttering a cleaning charm on both Harry and her precious rug. Irritably, she adjusted the large black vulture hat on her head, waiting for James's arrival.

Neville's Grams? Harry instantly recognized the vulture hat that Neville had dressed Boggart Snape in during Defense Against the Dark Arts third year. His chuckle was smothered, however, by James Potter's arrival. Luckily for Mrs. Longbottom, he was much better at staying on his feet after Floo travel.

"Where's Neville?" James asked, looking around for him.

Mrs. Longbottom fidgeted slightly. "He couldn't make it today; he's been summoned by the Ministry." She scowled. "Apparently the blasted Ministry hadn't had the heart to leave Neville alone today of all days. Not including you two, of course," she added hastily.

"No problem at all, Augusta." Lily smiled reassuringly. "You know we are not –er–" she glanced suspiciously around the room before lowering her voice, "Are you positive there are no bugs in the room? Have they all been exterminated? If I remember correctly, you had a fairly troublesome pesk problem about a month ago."

Harry looked up, his interest peaked. Surveillance had been placed in Mrs. Longbottom's house? But why? Who would want to spy on an old lady?

Wait. Not Mrs. Longbottom. Neville, or members of the Order of the Phoenix.

Mrs. Longbottom tittered impatiently. "Yes, yes, of course, I had Nymphadora charm the place, make it safe. I would have had you do it, Lily dear, but you are already under suspicion; I did not wish to add to it."

Lily and James both nodded their thanks.

"Wait," Violet interrupted brashly. "What do you mean 'you are already under suspicion'? You told me everything was okay!" she glared accusingly at her father, who did not look guilty in the slightest.

"It's not as bad as it sounds, Vi –"

"How's that?"

Lily sighed. "Everyone knows we have strong ties with Dumbledore, that we have a very personal reason for wanting Voldemort dead and joining the Order. Lots of people are suspected –"

"But 'lots of people' aren't my mum and dad!" she yelled back angrily.

"Excuse me young lady," Mrs. Longbottom snapped. "This is supposed to be a quiet day of remembrance, not of accusations!"

Violet looked down at the rug, ashamed. "I'm sorry."

Harry soaked all of this in with interest. They were all so rigid; there's been a constant intensity and unease that had not been present as often in his world. He observed the family.

Maybe he'd never noticed because he'd never had this before.

He thought about the Weasleys, how good they'd been to him ever since meeting Ron on the Hogwarts Express all those years ago. They treated him like a second son, but it wasn't the same; just as each family member had a dynamic with another, Harry found himself understanding these people more every second he spends with them. They already have a previously established relationship, and he's taking advantage of that.

"Well, best we get a move on then," Mrs. Longbottom said gruffly.

"W –why couldn't we have just met there?" Violet asked meekly.

James took her hand as they ventured outside. "The cemetery's really close to Aug –Mrs. Longbottom's house, and we'd felt that this year, we should walk there together."

"Oh."

They walked along the breezy London streets in silence, hugging their scarves closer to their bodies as the howling of the wind grew stronger, as if wailing for the Longbottoms' loss. It was an unusually cold day, Harry noted, fingering his cozy red and gold Gryffindor scarf. He had deliberately stayed in the rear of the group, where he was free to his thoughts without interruption.

This was just so depressing. Harry had an inane urge to kick, fight, do something, take action, act brashly, act upon that Gryffindor recklessness and courage.

But something was holding him back. Perhaps it was that dream, stored in the back of his mind as a red flag of caution. Maybe it was hearing Sirius's voice in his head, warning him against petulant action, advice Sirius himself had not heeded.

Diving straight into action is what cost Sirius his life. Harry was not going to let it take his; no, not before he finished what he started. Not before he defeated Voldemort. Harry blew hot air into his palms, rubbing them together to warm up his hands. Why the hell was it so cold? It's summer; it's supposed to be warm. How strange.

Something caught Harry's eye. A sliver of wood peeked down from underneath James's sleeve. So he has his wand out and ready for an attack, Harry observed. Was the danger even more escalated here?

Must be. As they neared the cemetery, shouts also seemed to be echoing closer. A game of soccer raged, both parents and coaches yelling out encouragement and support for their respective teams. Mrs. Longbottom angrily muttered something about "the nerve – disrespect for the sanctity of the dead –"

Harry couldn't help but agree, just as the soccer players couldn't help that the field had been built next to a cemetery. Blame the politicians.

The old, rusty gate creaked as it swung open of its own accord to meet them, but as he passed through, something got caught in his hair. Frowning, Harry picked it out, and briefly glanced at it. The leaf was rather big, and rather ordinary, if not for the small heart shaped hole in the middle. Shrugging, Harry carelessly tossed it aside, letting it catch a breeze and float away.

The noise coming from the soccer game had quieted, but Harry figured the match must be over. He supposed that was a good thing, considering why they were there. Reverence.

No one else was there. Harry kept on glancing suspiciously behind him or toward every swaying branch, every snap of twigs, and every crunch of gravel beneath their feet. One can never be too careful, especially these days, especially in this place.

Harry never liked cemeteries; he hated them. When he was little, and dragged reluctantly someplace by the Dursleys, they would pass by a little graveyard in Surrey. It had been horrible for little Harry, who couldn't help but wonder if his parents were trapped somewhere, their "revolting corpses decaying into dust" as Uncle Vernon had so eloquently put it. "Good riddance," he had added none too quietly, as if their deaths had merely been an afterthought to him, just one of those anonymous people on the news instead of his sister and brother-in-law. Well, at least for these strangers, most people would feel pity about their situation; not for the Potters, however. No, Uncle Vernon just didn't give a shit about those particular in-laws.

It hadn't helped his fear of cemeteries when Dudley had shoved him, giggling crazily, into an open, unoccupied grave meant for a well loved elderly man, whose coffin would be carried amongst his family and friends hours later. Poor Harry had been so traumatized by that experience, his unheard screaming from beneath the earth, heart thumping out of his chest as he wondered if the high dirt walls would collapse, leaving him to suffocate alone and abandoned.

Would anyone have mourned for him if it had?

Probably not, not by the Muggles he knew. Not by the Dursleys, the only family he had, a family who hated everything about him, from his once crooked glasses to his unruly hair all the way to the stupid scar that had landed him in their custody in the first place.

He vaguely remembered the woman with kind green eyes; not quite as brilliant a green as his own, but a memorable sort of green nonetheless. They had reminded Harry of his mum, whatever memory of her that was etched in his sub-consciousness. He remembered that long stretch of time when they had just stood there, staring at each other. Silence had bridged the distance between the mourners and the boy standing on a mound of dirt that didn't belong to him. To Harry, the woman above had been miles higher than him, perhaps almost stretching to heaven.

For a short, amazing moment, Harry had thought he was staring at his mum, finally here to rescue him from his guardians and bully of a son, the reason why he had been stuck in that grave in the first place.

But the woman had blinked out of her shock at seeing a scrawny little boy standing in a grave and called out to someone. In no time, Harry had been lifted out of the grave, proceeding to be interrogated.

Who are your parents?

Where are they?

What's your name, son?

When –er, I mean, how long were you in there?

Why were you in there?

Harry had sat there in silence, hoping beyond hope that they would never find the Dursleys. If he had been lucky, he probably would have been shipped off to an orphanage. So Harry had kept his silence, keeping his fingers crossed that he'd be able to escape the Dursleys, even if it meant living under the state's care. Alas, no such luck; they had recovered him. Even back then, Harry had not been stupid enough to think that his aunt and uncle had searched for him because they actually cared. No, they just hadn't wanted to have a black smudge on what they considered a perfect parental record, nor did they wish to have the government on their arses for losing him.

C'mere boy, Uncle Vernon had growled, leading Harry away with a disgruntled expression on his face, disgusted that his freakishly abnormal nephew had called the bad sort of attention towards his perfectly normal family again. Of course, typical Uncle Vernon, the porky man had completely ignored the fact that it had been his own equally pig-like son who had pushed Harry into that position in the first place.

Something white was shoved into Harry's face, breaking into his memories.

"Take it, Harry," Violet urged under her breath, waving the white rose between two fingertips.

He took it from her, noticing that everyone was also holding one. They must have conjured it without him noticing. Mrs. Longbottom stepped forward in front of the two graves, the wrinkled creases of her face somber.

"Oh, Frank, Alice."

The wind brushed past her, carrying her voice into the air, perhaps where her son can hear her. She looked as if she wanted to say more, but couldn't find the words. Instead, she carefully placed the white

rose –symbolizing life, instead of death– between the two graves, tucking it in carefully so the wind could not easily misplace it.

This simple, sentimental custom was the best way to remember their lives, instead of mourning their deaths.

He placed his rose between the others. Sinking down to his knees, Harry sharpened his senses for danger but allowed his mind to wander in those precious moments of meditation.

Crack.

Eyes snapping open, Harry realized that the delicate white petals had been frozen into brittle ice sculptures.

Oh no.

He could already feel his insides freezing, his head screaming with voices that weren't his, his heart pumping as both his and the voices' fear seized him. No time to think, he had to act before –

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!” Harry shouted on instinct, trying to get his hazy mind to focus on that happy memory, to sift through the darkness and loss to find the light. He didn't even remember reaching for his wand; but there it was, outstretched in front of him as the brilliant glow emitted from it, shaping into a fierce stag, antlers bowed. Prongs charged at the Dementor, sending it spiraling away before it had a chance to get to him.

“Harry, watch out!” James shouted, sounding slightly shocked, as he protected the rest of his family. “Get over here!”

Harry nodded and turned to help them when a cold rattling breath caught him off guard from behind. He tried to fight it, urged Prongs, who was slowly disappearing, to come again, but the stag had faded –Prongs was gone. Pressure began building up in his head as the echoes of the dead increased their assault on his mind.

Pleas, defiance, panic, sorrow, love, cold remorseless laughter –

“Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead!”

“Stand aside, you silly girl!”

“Your mother need not have died, you know...”

“Lily, take Harry and go! It’s him! Go! Run! I’ll hold him off!”

Gravity.

Cedric fell as the burst of green light struck him, his eyes wide open in shock –

Sirius, caught in mid laugh, disappearing gracefully behind the veil...

Professor Dumbledore, pleading with the Potion’s Master, his eyes no longer twinkling but caught between fear and anticipation for the next journey, his body falling over the edge of the tallest tower to face it before it met the ground –

A single voice broke out amongst the chaos.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

Another joined it, making Harry’s ears ring as two silver figures plowed down the remaining Dementors.

He didn’t know how much time had passed. Groggily, he registered that someone was shoving something hard and sweet into his mouth.

A chocolate bar.

Harry sat up as soon as he had bitten into the candy, realizing that he was lying on a park bench, still inside the graveyard. Violet sat on the ground cross legged, hugging her knees and shaking. Whatever the Dementors had made her see, it must have been bad –she looked a sickening ashen color, with permanent shock etched on her face.

But he didn’t have long to dwell on it, for a pair of long arms had attached themselves around Harry, bringing him into a bone crushing

embrace. His own green eyes stared back at him in worry, shock and wonder, filled with unrestrained emotions.

“You had me worried sick!” Lily snapped, her words underlined with a shrillness that echoed Aunt Petunia. “What were you thinking, trying to tackle that –that thing? You could have been killed. You okay?” She added, ruffling his hair affectionately before embracing him again.

“Don’t suffocate the boy, Lils,” James said. He then turned to Harry, frowning. “Where did you learn to conjure a Patronus? Remus said that’d be a part of this year’s curriculum.”

Harry couldn’t very well say that he’d learned it from said werewolf in his third year; he had to divert the attention from himself. “Where did the Dementors go? Er –and where’s Mrs. Longbottom?”

James eyed him suspiciously, clearly noticing that Harry was trying to avoid the question. However, he didn’t press the matter further, merely pointing a somber finger in the direction of Frank and Alice Longbottoms’ graves.

Mrs. Longbottom was kneeling on the frosty ground, her old, wizened hands carefully chipping ice off the tombstone with tender care. Her face was expressionless, at an impasse between sorrow and fury. But when she briefly directed her face in their direction, Harry could see the old woman’s eyes both blazing and watering with tears and anger. In that moment, she looked like a tiger, ready to pounce on anyone at any time in a petulant second.

Harry wondered if that was what Sirius had felt the night Harry’s parents died, the same very alive people standing next to him. He wondered if Sirius’s heart had been filled with the fresh anguish in Mrs. Longbottom’s eyes, and if that anguish had turned to fury, if that fury had mutated into a thirst for revenge, for that bloodshed of whoever had murdered them, or desecrated their memory.

Unfortunately and fortunately for Mrs. Longbottom, the Dementors cannot be easily found or destroyed; like the despicable traitorous rat Peter Pettigrew, they work for Voldemort, and are under his protection. Voldemort definitely would not have spared her, would not

haven't given a thought to it when he waved his wand at her and lazily uttered the Unforgivable Avada Kedavra.

He has no heart, not even compassion for a woman who's lost her son and daughter-in-law in a horrible way.

And soon, when the time comes, no one will show Voldemort any compassion or mercy. Not that Tom Riddle had ever wanted it.

"You sure we shouldn't be with Augusta right now?"

James shook his head. "No, I think she wants to be left alone. Don't worry, Lily," he added quickly, noticing Lily about to argue, "if she needs us, she'll fire call us."

Her green eyes narrowed, but after an internal battle, she decided to be reasonable, instead just asking tiredly, "Anyone hungry?"

Three heads confirmed in unison.

"Hot chocolate should do the trick," she murmured to herself. "I think I still have some left over —" She began to take out the hot cocoa packets and a meager bag of marshmallows, but James immediately took the ingredients out of her hand, insisting on making it.

"I'm perfectly capable of brewing hot chocolate, James; I'm not an invalid."

James sighed. "I know, but you really should sit down and rest. You're pregnant, remember?"

"Of course I remember I'm pregnant, James," she snapped, reminding Harry of the tempered argument he had witnessed in Snape's Pensieve, when Lily had informed James that she'd rather go out with the giant squid than him any day. "After all, I'm the one who'll have the morning sickness, the nausea, people constantly touching my stomach, invading my personal space —"

James smiled patiently, knowing she hadn't meant it. "And mood swings — I know. But it's been a tough morning, and you really should rest. I insist. I promise I won't poison the hot chocolate, scout's

honor.” He added lightly, using that Muggle terminology that he’d heard once.

“As long as it’s not poisoned.” Lily grumbled, but she did sit down with her kids.

A smile stayed on James’s lips as he began to make hot chocolate without magic, the Muggle way, allowing the sweet aroma to fill their noses and hearts, battling the lingering coldness that stays in the system after a Dementor attack.

Violet sure looked like she could use some hot cocoa. Despite being indoors again, her face was still abnormally pale, her usually bright, mischievous hazel eyes darkened and dulled by something no one else could see.

“Er –you okay?” Harry asked awkwardly. He felt this inert concern for her, but that may just be because she looked an inch away from death.

She flinched at his words, spooked by something hidden behind the shadows of her eyes. “I –I’m fine,” she muttered quickly in a nearly inaudible tone.

Frowning, Harry shook his head; he didn’t believe her. Violet ignored him, but didn’t shake off her mother’s comforting arm around her shoulder, gently stroking her vibrant hair. Lily smiled at Harry, showing him without words that she appreciated him being kind to his sister.

No one has ever looked at him like that. Mrs. Weasley came close, but it wasn’t the same, because although in many ways she was a surrogate mother to him, she wasn’t his actual mother.

“Drink up.”

Harry sipped his hot chocolate, savoring the taste and the warmth that spread all the way down to his toes. “Thanks,” he said politely, granted a smile in return as James sat down next to him.

They sat there in comfortable silence, enjoying their company and sipping the drinks. Harry couldn't help but notice that Lily and James kept on glancing worriedly at Violet, who was stubbornly pretending not to notice it, instead staring ahead into space and stirring her cocoa absentmindedly.

"What's wrong, Violet?" Lily finally asked.

Violet froze, letting her spoon clang against the ceramic cup. "Nothing's wrong."

"I don't believe that."

"You don't have to."

"Violet, talk to me; it's no good to pent things up inside."

"Why?"

"It's going to have to come out eventually."

"I don't want it to come out now."

"You really believe that?"

"It's my feelings, Mum. My business."

"I'm just trying to help, Vi."

"Well don't!" Violet shouted, her knuckles white from being clenched so hard.

"Violet." James warned sternly before turning back to his wife. "Lily, let it go."

Lily bit her lip, but did back off reluctantly. Harry noticed the fear reflected in her eyes, though –fear for her daughter, fear for the unknown, fear of the dark.

“Can I go to my room?” Violet asked, her voice strained and tight, trying her very best to keep it even and composed.

“Sure,” Both parents said in unison, and both continued to watch her back as she practically sprinted out of the kitchen and listened to her feet as it pounded up the stairs.

Lily put her face in her hands, looking lost. “I shouldn’t have interrogated her like that before she was ready –”

“You were worried; we both were,” James said firmly. “We’re going to have to talk to her about it soon anyway. Do you know what’s bothering her, Harry?”

“What?” Harry asked, surprised. “No.”

James sighed. “It’s probably still the same thing, Lily. And with school looming closer –”

“It gets harder.” Lily finished, nodding in understanding.

Harry was confused. What were they talking about?

“Hey, Harry, do you think your mum and I can have a word alone? I know you want to be informed about Order stuff, but this is classified.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Harry said distractedly, quickly getting up to retreat to “his” room. However, before reaching it, he paused at Violet’s door, carefully listening for any signs of life inside. It was completely silent. He resisted the urge to go in, and continued on down the hall.

A loud welcoming “HOOT!” when he entered the room made him nearly jump out of his skin in shock, and he had his wand instantly out and pointing at the owl perched on the desk, a roll of parchment tied around its legs. A surge of hope swelled in Harry’s heart as he realized that the owl must have brought Ron’s answer back. He eagerly relieved the owl of its burden, took a few moments to rummage the drawers for owl treats, and finally unrolled Ron’s letter.

Potter,

STAY THE BLOODY HELL AWAY FROM MY SISTER!

Harry reread the letter again and again and didn't find any hidden meaning in it whatsoever, no hint of Ron, his best friend. Sinking into his chair, Harry, in an impulsive act of frustration, tore the parchment to shreds.

He had never felt so alone in his life.

The bacon sizzled above the stove as Harry prepared breakfast, its scent filling his nose with familiarity. This wasn't a huge task by any means; he was used to making breakfast for the Dursleys. Still, it was nice to be able to cook without worrying about thin, disapproving lips screaming at him every five minutes. After all, nothing had ever been good enough for his aunt's ickle Dudders. He smiled; he didn't have to worry about that here.

"Thanks for helping out, Harry."

"It's okay," he answered distractedly, busy turning the bacon over. It hissed as the aroma released into the kitchen, grease and oil sizzling in the pan. What had once been a stressful affair actually seemed pleasant and calming when he didn't have his aunt breathing down his neck like a bony Hungarian Horntail.

Lily eyed him suspiciously. "I'm curious, Harry, to know when you turned into a chef. Only time you had showed interest in cooking was when we got you the Magic Desert Oven when you were five. Burned the cookies every time –you didn't cast a spell on yourself, did you?"

"What?"

"Just because you're of age now does not mean you need to use magic for everything! Honestly Harry –"

"What are we screaming at Harry about?"

Lily turned to acknowledge her husband, who had been running a hand through severely disheveled hair. "We are not doing anything. I am yelling, not screaming." She placed her hands on her hips. "Your son –"

"Oh, so when he's in trouble, he's just my son now, is he?" he teased, smiling patiently.

"Your son has been using spells on himself to enhance his culinary skills."

“But I didn’t use a spell!” Harry groaned. “She’s being paranoid! You’re being paranoid.”

Sparkling green eyes flashed dangerously as Lily opened her mouth to snap back –James decided it was best to intervene. “The bacon’s burning!” he shouted.

Lily swiftly turned on instinct –sure enough, there was now a coal-like quality to the unsupervised bacon. She flicked an urgent finger in the direction of the stove; to Harry’s surprise, the knob controlling the stove switched off on its own.

She can do wandless magic?

James nodded in approval. “I forgot how much of a magic booster pregnancy is.”

Lily smiled “I didn’t. Remember that time at Hogwarts when I was pregnant with Violet? When Harry got himself lost?”

“He wasn’t lost, Lils, just picking up on that Marauder pendant for exploring –”

“–and worrying his mother so sick that she would have blown up some of Albus’s possessions if her ex-Marauder husband hadn’t stopped her.” Lily finished, gazing at James affectionately.

Albus’s possessions –Harry blushed, remembering his own temper tantrum in Professor Dumbledore’s office. Unfortunately, that occasion was not one to laugh about; the meeting had been very serious, concerning not Harry’s physical whereabouts, but the placement of a great burden upon his shoulders –Harry, the Boy-Who-Lived; Harry, the Chosen One; Harry, not the person, but a fulfillment of a prophecy, an icon of achievement and of the past and future downfall of Lord Voldemort.

Although he had felt justified in his fury at the time, he still regretted his loss of control, of wearing his heart on his sleeve. He scowled, kicking himself mentally for invoking Snape’s words. –Snape, the betrayer, the Death Eater. Dumbledore’s murderer.

Fists clenched tightly, Harry had managed to disperse his scowl by the time Lily turned to face him. "Would you mind waking Violet up for breakfast?" she asked casually, but her eyes warned him –perhaps about her state of mind after the Dementor attack. His interest was piqued –just how differently had Potter family had fared through the years? Unfortunately, a direct question would be too suspicious; from the way they talked about it, Harry was expected to know exactly what had happened to his little sister, whatever it may be.

"Okay."

Still, when he found himself standing in front of her door, his fist remained suspended over the barrier, in the process of knocking. Instinct took over, and he put his ear against the door, wishing he had a pair of Extendable Ears on him. As hard as he tried, Harry couldn't hear anything; but he didn't really know Violet –he had no way of knowing whether or not his was a good sign.

Either way, he still had to wake her up, so he gently turned the knob, prepared for whatever he may face in there.

The room was dead silent. The lump under the covers indicated that Violet was still sleeping, but it unnerved him that he couldn't hear her breathing. Harry shook his head; he'd roomed with four snoring boys for the past six years. It was more than likely that his sense of a normal breathing pattern became incredibly distorted because of Ron and Neville in particular.

Ron. He winced at the thought of his best mate. He'd never wanted them to accompany him, to willingly walk with him towards certain death; yet Harry felt their absence most profoundly –it didn't feel right not to have them here. It was hard to accept that the two people who would never abandon him weren't here, not to laugh at his mistakes or spur him to research. No matter how hard he'd tried to push them away, they stuck to him. Harry smiled.

Like fungus.

"Er –Violet? Wake up." Harry poked the lump.

No response.

“C’mon, breakfast’s up.” Frustrated, Harry unraveled the blanket’s layers to reveal a mass of auburn hair.

“Wake up!”

He frowned; there hadn’t been a single reaction. By now, Harry had half a mind to just let her sleep, but considering how she’d holed herself in her room for the past week, he knew it was time to reappear.

Harry hated not knowing. All he knew was that she was reacting violently to whatever traumatic experience she’d seen that day at the graveyard –but he didn’t know what. But he of all people knew what it was like to dwell on the past, to regret and mourn until he’d become so self-involved that he forgot what he was missing.

He didn’t know her, but he felt obligated to give her a reality check. After all, Ginny had told it to him straight during that really low time in his life, when he had believed that Voldemort was possessing him; he’ll always love her for that ability to know exactly what a person needed. Ginny had known that he didn’t want pity, sympathetic apologies, or something to soften the blow. No, she had known exactly what Harry had needed –something that he himself hadn’t even been able to see.

It was an innate feeling, built into him despite the years at the Dursleys, despite the loneliness. She wasn’t real; she wasn’t really his sister, but he felt compelled to try nevertheless. Moving closer to the lump, Harry panicked briefly, fearing that she’d died. But as he inspected her closer, he realized with a sigh of relief that her skin was still warm, that she was indeed breathing, if just very quietly.

Surveying her room carefully, he tried to look for something that would help get her attention. Quidditch posters adorned the walls, from the Tornados to Hogwarts’ own Gryffindor house team. Intrigued by that particular poster against his will, Harry found himself moving closer to the red and gold picture.

Harry saw himself zooming around the picture, scarlet robes billowing out behind him and eyes narrowed in concentration as he chased after the snitch. As Poster Harry flew to the front, he caught a glimpse of the “C” embroidered on his robes. Apparently, the fact that he was captain had not changed here. Poster Harry caught the snitch with a triumphant grin before letting it go again, giving it a good few seconds head start, and tearing after it. He examined the rest of the poster to find some familiar faces. Katie Bell was attempting to score on Ron, who deftly saved the first shot, but missed the second one, scored by –

Violet.

Reminded of why he was there, he reluctantly turned away from the memoir of his favorite sport and looked around the rest of the room. There were definitely some alien girly touches to the room, especially the numerous moving snapshots of family and who Harry assumed were friends. Something drew him to slowly approach these moving visuals, if only to understand Violet better.

A picture of the Potters, smiling in front of the Hogwarts Express, stood confidently on the nightstand. Lily’s eyes were brightly watery, and even James looked on the verge of tears –but proud tears at that. A very young looking Violet was smiling brightly into the camera, barely able to conceal her excitement. Harry, who was around thirteen, looked as if he was trying to appear bored with the family picture. However, the ghost of a grin tugging at his lips canceled out his attempt.

Despite himself, Harry felt a similar on his face. He looked at another photo on the dresser, surprised to see a recent picture of Violet and Neville, arms around each other in the backdrop of what looked like the Gryffindor common room. They were both laughing and looking like they were having a grand time, but Harry could see the shadow in both of their eyes.

There was one picture, however, that was not proudly displayed. He would’ve missed it if he hadn’t been looking at the picture of Violet and Neville. One was turned down so that only the backing was

visible, leaving the framed picture to be suffocated by the dresser. Curious, Harry had been about lift the picture back to its rightful position when he was filled with a sudden sense of doubt. This picture was hidden away from sight for a reason.

Curiosity had always gotten the best of him.

It didn't look all that remarkable to him. It was just a picture of Violet and another girl, apparently baking something –though it didn't look like they were getting much baking done. Rather, complete chaos and a massive food fight were getting underway. Violet had the bowl, and she was flinging huge amounts of batter at her friend, who was trying to defend herself with a pan in front of her face. Occasionally, the friend would grab stray batter clinging to the counter and walls and throw it back at Violet until they were both thoroughly covered in batter, flour, and sugar.

Harry smirked. They looked like they were having fun. But why would Violet hide this picture?

Something, a hint of magic in the air, attempted to answer his question. He stared at her dresser, sensing something amiss there. He hesitated for a moment before tentatively opening it, blushing furiously as he was bombarded with the sight of bras and underwear –he almost gave up on that nagging feeling right then and there. He'd only been sent to wake her up, not invade her privacy.

But he knew that this wasn't right. Though he could feel his face practically burning up, instinct and doubt inclined him to search more thoroughly; he gently pushed her clothes aside, only to find several empty and full potions bottles at the bottom of the drawer.

Feeling apprehensive, he picked up a bottle and read the large letters in the front: Dreamless Sleeping Potion: Strong Dose. Near the bottom was a warning label: WARNING: Extensive use of this product for more than four times consecutively without healer supervision or a counter-potion to counteract the negative effects of this product may result in an addiction or serious harm. Advised to use three times a week at most. If any suspicious side effects occur, contact your healer immediately.

Harry froze. So this is why she was out cold. “Extensive use of this product for more than four times consecutively...may result in an addiction...” This doesn’t bode well for Violet, especially since it’s been more than four days since the Dementor incident. Silently, Harry counted six empty bottles –one for every night except for the first. But how did she get so many of these? Before he could muse over it more, a sharp, threatening hiss issued from behind him.

Spinning around, Harry gaped. How could he not have noticed that when he had first walked into the room?

The glaring serpent behind the glass cage eyed him with intense scrutiny, prompting him to hesitantly approach it. Why would Violet, a proud Gryffindor, want a snake for a pet? More importantly, why would James and Lily Potter, arguably the most anti-Voldemort couple in Britain, allow a creature so intimately associated with Voldemort reside in their home?

Harry froze. Violet couldn’t be a Parseltongue, could she? No; that’s impossible. There’s no way she could have gotten that ability. Well, there was one way to find out. Taking a glance at Violet’s still form, he made his way over to the snake, ignoring the suspicion in its fierce gaze.

“Has Violet ever spoken to you?”

The snake seemed taken aback, and its razor eyes, so like Voldemort’s, expressed wariness. “You speak the ancient language of the serpents?”

“Yes, but I only found out I could a few years ago.” Harry admitted. “Can Violet speak the noble language as well?” Flattery always worked.

“No, she cannot. But you’ve never spoken to me before either, and yet here you are, speaking in my tongue.”

He decided to change the subject. “Why were you hissing at me?”

“You were invading my mistress’s privacy.”

“I was worried. She is taking a potentially dangerous potion.”

Harry could have sworn he saw a flicker of concern in the snake’s otherwise expressionless eyes. “Is there anything I can do to help?” it asked finally.

“You could help me wake her up,” Harry suggested. “No biting, though.” The snake nodded and inclined its head at the top of its cage. After he’d removed the ceiling of the snake’s small habitat, all he had to do was stand back and watch. He wasn’t exactly sure what it planned on doing as it slithered out of sight beneath the covers, but whatever it was, it worked. Harry had to clasp his hands over his ears as a high pitch screamed filled his ears. She must have been terrified, but he couldn’t help but smile, feeling a slight vindication for Violet’s earlier prank.

Violet immediately leapt out of bed and, upon seeing Harry, seized his shoulders and hid behind him. “Harry!” she shrieked. “There’s a spider or something in my covers! I felt something slide past me! Get it!”

Harry frowned –snakes and spiders didn’t move or feel the same. Apparently, Violet had stronger arachnophobia than Ron if she was convinced her own pet snake was a spider. “Relax, Vi, it’s just your snake,” Harry reassured her, pausing as he realized that he’d used her nickname.

But he didn’t have long to ponder it because a very hard punch sent a throbbing pain through his shoulder. “OW!” Harry complained. “What’d you do that for?”

“For scaring the living hell out of me.”

“Sorry, but you weren’t waking up.” Which reminded him – “Oh, and I found this lying around.” He waved the Dreamless Sleep Potion in front of her face. “Care to explain this?”

Violet's expression immediately hardened at the sight of the potion. "That's none of your business."

"It becomes my business if you're addicted to these things," Harry countered, pointing at the warning label. "Or did you not bother to read it before chugging it for six nights straight?"

Violet's lips twisted. Leaning close to Harry, he could see her eyes change from mischievousness to absolute viciousness. "You keep my secret, and I'll keep yours," she growled. But there was a hint of hurt in her voice that paused his tongue. But –

Harry looked at her in confusion, slightly worried. What secret was she talking about? Was it concerning this place's Harry, or him?

"Listen," he said, trying to pacify her anger. "I'm sorry, all right? I was just worried when you wouldn't even respond to anything; I'd thought you'd died!"

The fury dissipated from her face, morphing into apologetic regret. "Sorry, Harry, I didn't know."

Harry sighed, reigning back in his emotions. "It's okay. Just –just promise me that you won't take this stuff anymore, or I'll tell Li – Mum." He bit his lip. He knew he probably won't be here much longer once he finds out a way to get back to his own world. Though he was reluctant to get close to these people, it seemed that he was still managing to do a good job of getting to know them.

Damn.

"Mind getting out of my room before I change, you prat?" Violet asked with a hint of her usual mischievousness.

She laughed heartily at his expression. Rolling his eyes, Harry left the room feeling as if he'd helped her in some capacity, and closed the door softly behind him.

But the moment she heard the door close, Violet's smile disappeared. Tap. Tap.

“Let the owl in, will you, Harry?” James asked without looking up, thoroughly engrossed in the Daily Prophet.

He obliged, but he couldn’t hide from himself the slight leap of hope that Ron, Hermione, anybody familiar had owled him saying that they too were confused, that they didn’t know what was going on, or even better –that they did know what was happening. But he recognized the owl immediately, and unless a member of the Hogwarts staff had been transported here as well, the envelopes the owl carried would be purely business.

And sure enough, the barn owl dropped one thick envelope in front of Violet and held the other out to Harry, who stroked the owl’s head affectionately. He felt a sudden pang of nostalgia for Hedwig, missing her familiarity. She’d been his first friend in the wizarding world, after all.

“Hogwarts letters!” Violet immediately tore hers apart.

Harry too opened his, albeit a bit more ceremoniously. Inside was the usual letter, but with an additional paragraph at the end:

Due to recent events and possible Death Eater threats, we understand if you choose not to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year. This decision is at your discretion; however, please keep in mind that this decision will affect your education in the future, and though you are welcome to come back after the war is over, we recommend that you learn as much as possible about defending yourself. Thus, our curriculum this year will emphasize self-defense as well as counter-jinxes/curses. Please be sure to owl with your decision as to whether or not Hogwarts shall expect you come September 1st

Professor Minerva McGonagall

Headmistress

Headmistress? Harry mused, but, that means –

It means that Dumbledore's dead here too.

His heart sank. Could this get any worse? He was hoping that Professor Dumbledore would be able to help him here. It looks as if he's really was on his own after all. There aren't any reliable people Harry can turn to now; McGonagall might, but really, how could he be sure? He'll just have to rely on himself for now, and pick up information on the way. As Dream Sirius had said in that one disturbing nightmare: "Sometimes you just have to be patient and let things run its course."

"Well, we'd better stop by Diagon Alley today to buy all your supplies," Lily said, taking the supply list from her daughter and examining it carefully.

Harry wasn't listening; he was too busy staring at something –well, two somethings. He smiled at the shiny Quidditch captain badge, but his eyes went wide when he also gingerly plucked another golden badge; this time, it had "Head Boy" engraved in it.

Even though this wasn't his world, he couldn't help but be pleasantly surprised about this. Unfortunately, before he could process the implications of the advantages he would enjoy while trying to figure out this mystery, Violet had leaned over and noticed the badge as well.

"You got Head Boy?" she exclaimed, clearly as surprised as he was. "But who in the right mind would make you an authority?"

"Well, your Mum and I were Head Boy and Girl when we were in Hogwarts, and I was one of the worst pranksters around," James reminded her. "Which wasn't that long ago, mind you."

Violet looked thoughtful, but then seemed to come upon a disgusting sort of revelation, for she wrinkled her nose and said emphatically, "Ew."

But Lily was too busy tightly embracing Harry with bright eyes to notice, beaming at him in pride. "Congratulations on making Head Boy Harry! I'm so proud of you!"

“Er –thanks.” Harry replied uncertainly, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. It wasn’t like he’d actually done anything here, especially if the prophecy had been reversed.

James grinned, noticing the look on Harry’s face. “I think Harry here is a bit embarrassed, Lils.”

“That’s too bad, because we’re going to have a nice celebration – James, you ought to invite Sirius and them.”

Harry’s stomach sank, definitely not looking forward to that part. He wasn’t sure if he could deal with seeing Sirius again, especially after that dream. And he seriously doubted if he could control himself if Pettigrew came; it would take a lot of self-control to not hex him right then and there.

But that’d look a tad suspicious.

Meanwhile, Lily was reading Violet’s Hogwarts letter, frowning. “Looks like we’ll have to tell Minerva you’re still coming,” she said. With a wave of her finger, she conjured a quill, a bottle of jet black ink, and a piece of parchment, inscribing her letter.

Violet giggled as Lily rolled up the parchment magically.

“Forgot to add the reassurance that we’ll behave, did you?” she teased, grinning widely.

Lily gave a deliberate, long suffering sigh. “Well, can’t very well guarantee that any longer, can I? Not a baby anymore.” She pinched Violet’s cheeks playfully.

“Mum, the guarantee ended when I started first year,” Violet pointed out. “Harry hovered around me too much for my own good.”

“He’s just being protective.”

Harry looked up, frowning. Was he overprotective and overbearing like Ron? Did he get angry when Violet dated people? He cringed,

remembering Ron's outrage when Dean Thomas had been dating Ginny. Of course, he himself hadn't exactly been innocent of that either –

Still, he believed that he'd had an extremely justified reason for resentment towards Dean –it hadn't really mattered that he was a perfectly nice guy the rest of the time, when he wasn't with Ginny romantically.

He felt comfortable, reluctantly finding himself at ease with this family routine that had become a part of his life. However, he couldn't help but be bothered about how normal Violet seemed when the night before she had been taking a Dreamless Sleeping Potion. This, like many things here, didn't feel right.

Harry sighed and took a bite of his toast. Sometimes things were better off left alone.

Harry clutched his wand tightly in his right pocket. Diagon Alley had never looked so painfully desolate.

He remembered last year, when he went shopping with the Weasleys; despite the fear then, it hadn't been as bad as this. It wasn't the fact that it was forlorn that bothered him –on the contrary, it was quite busy. No, it was the way people huddled in packs, the way everyone had their heads bent down, trying not to draw attention. It was way no one stopped to greet friends and acquaintances because they didn't dare look up in fear of seeing a Death Eater, out to torture, maim, and kill.

It was the way that fear engulfed them all.

Aurors patrolled the streets, occasionally stopping "suspicious looking blokes" and questioning them. Not once did the Potters get stopped, although when they passed by the other Aurors, they waved to Lily and James, greeting them. Harry did a double take when he spotted Tonks, who was as effervescent as ever, the only smiling, confident person in the entire alley. He smiled to himself, wondering if Tonks and Lupin were together here.

Despite looking as if she were on Auror duty, Tonks still made her way towards them once they had been noticed. "Wotcher Potters," she said cheerfully.

Harry grinned despite himself. It was nice to hear something that was familiar to him.

"Hey Tonks. On duty?"

She nodded grimly. "Yeah, but it's hard to see how much a wreck this place has become. You never hear any laughter anymore."

James nodded. "I know –it's almost unnerving. How's Remus doing? I wish I could've been there with him but Auror duty got in the way –"

Tonks glanced around to make sure no one was too close to them and dropped her voice considerably. "He's fine. He had a few pretty bad cuts, but it was able to mend no problem. With Snape –you know– gone, he's had to readjust to nights without Wolfsbane."

Harry glanced quickly at his sister, her unsurprised expression telling him that she, too, knew Remus's secret. Although, he remembered, it probably wasn't much of a secret anymore, considering how that traitorous bathad revealed it third year.

"Well, better get back to patrolling before Kingsley gets on my arse for 'idling around.'" She grimaced and glanced around reluctantly.

"We'll see you later then, Nymphadora."

"Only Remus and my mother can call me that, Prongs." Tonks smirked and turned on her heel, throwing back a wave behind her.

Watching Tonks's retreating back, Harry suddenly had a burst of inspiration. "Can we go to Weasley's Wizard Wheezes?"

Harry tried not to get his hopes up too high. It wasn't likely that Ron and Ginny would be there at the exact same time Harry was, but at

least he could try to get some info from the twins, who would surely be there.

Lily's sharp green eyes stopped scanning the area to rest on Harry, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, did you say? Never heard of it."

"Never mind." Harry said quickly. "I think the Weasley twins Fred and George were talking about opening up a joke shop or something. Sorry, must have gotten mixed up."

"Yeah, I remember them mention that too," Violet piped in helpfully. "Too bad they couldn't get the gold to actually open it, though. The stuff they were selling on those order forms was brilliant."

"Which, of course, you didn't buy," Lily said.

"Yeah, of course," Violet added quickly, catching James's eye and grinning.

"For Merlin's sake, James, you didn't order them too!" Lily said loudly, attracting stares from passerbys. If Diagon Alley had been whole and full of noise, nobody would have noticed. However, with the atmosphere full of a fearful silence, her indoor voice sounded like Bagman's booming commentary projected with the sonorous charm.

To respond, Lily irritably glared at the people staring. "What, you've never heard a scolding before? Shove off before I arrest all of you!"

At Lily's threat, the halting groups went back on their way, their swift steps significantly quicker now.

"Lily dear, didn't you read the section of the Auror manual about, er – 'the abuse of your position as an officer of justice?'"

His wife merely regarded James with incredulous eyes. "You remember the exact line from the manual?"

“Not exactly. But that was the gist of it.” James eyed the street warily. “We’d better get a move on, then, if we’re going to finish all this shopping,” he explained casually. But Harry knew better.

Even the tinted sky looked foreboding.

Purchases weighing down their bags considerably, they stepped out of Flourish and Bolts with their new school books, every box on Lily’s checklist marked off.

“Ready then?” James asked, eyeing the steadily darkening sky. Attacks weren’t frequent in Diagon Alley, but he couldn’t help but be grateful that nothing bad had happened.

CRACK. A bolt of red flashed past James and hit Flourish and Bolts, sending a few bricks crumbling to the ground.

“GET DOWN!” James bellowed as he pulled his wand out, shoving Harry behind him.

“We have to get to the Ministry for backup!” Lily said urgently, sending a stunner in the direction of the approaching hooded figure.

James swore loudly, torn between getting the severely needed reinforcements, helping the screaming shoppers fleeing in terror, and ensuring the safety of his children.

But before they could decide what to do, a powerful dust cloud swept them up, separating the Potter family. James cried out in pain as he was thrown into a wall, the bricks groaning in protest. He fell to the floor hard, but struggled to get up, wand out and attempting to blink the dust out of his distorted vision. Luckily his glasses had managed to stay on the bridge of his nose.

“Protego.” He muttered, trying to buy himself some time while his vision sorted out. As the blurred figures became sharper, James found a masked Death Eater fruitlessly trying to break his shield.

James grinned, feeling a rush of adrenaline pumping through his veins. Despite their inhuman masks, it was only a man beneath the

dark robes –a man who was in the way of him finding his family, an obstacle.

Well, he won't be one anymore.
"Accio Harry!"

Harry's stomach lurched as he felt himself lifting up from the ground and being summoned towards the voice. Suddenly, the spell dropped him down abruptly. "Ouch," he muttered, extending the wand clutched in his hand towards the shadow above him.

"Sorry, big brother, but seeing as you were an unconscious lump of a log..." Violet apologized, giving him a hand up after putting a shield around them.

"How many?"

"I dunno –maybe twenty?"

"Twenty? Just for Diagon Alley?"

"Yeah, but not in this area. Lot of 'em scattered to chase down people and trash the shops I guess."

Suddenly, the shield faltered, its bright light flickering until it died away. Harry turned to ask what happened when he noticed Violet's ashen expression. The only time he had seen her like that was –

Harry felt it too, prickling at the back of his neck. Without thinking, he spun around and sent Prongs out to chase the lone Dementor away.

As the slight mist cleared, Harry was able too see three Death Eaters headed their way.

"STUPEFY!"

Harry saw the returning curses coming –he pushed Violet to the ground as a Cutting Curse sailed above their heads, scrambling to get back on his feet again.

With the blink of an eye, the Death Eaters Apparated right in front of them. Harry cursed as he flicked his wand, thinking Levicorpus in his head, but he was a split second too late.

“Expelliarmus!” BANG. Before Harry could react, the second Death Eater’s wand flew out of his hand and he was hanging upside down in the air, appearing to be caught in a hook on his right leg.

“Accio wand!” Violet shouted shakily. It had been she who had disarmed the Death Eater. Once the Death Eater’s wand flew into her hand, she efficiently snapped it in half, ignoring the Death Eater’s strangled cry. “Serves you right,” Violet spat. Harry spotted the third Death Eater fleeing into an alleyway –he quickly sent a Stunner towards him, but missed. He made to go after him, but Violet’s hand clenched onto his arm firmly.

“There’s someone else.”

Distant screams echoed from behind him. Harry quickly spun back around to see a new, taller Death Eater glide over to them gracefully, her robes billowing out behind her. There was something feminine in the way she carried herself, and he easily recognized the arrogance in her walk –she was a far greater threat than the others.

“Ah. Potter spawn.”

Harry gripped his wand, his suspicions confirmed. He knew that voice, the sadistic laugh that had crowed at seeing his godfather fall –

There was no way he was going to allow Bellatrix Lestrange to kill again.

Sectumsempra! But Bellatrix negated the Half-Blood Prince’s curse with a wave of her wand. “Tsk, tsk, baby Potter, I can read your moves like an open book. Weak and emotional, like your interfering parents and cousin of mine.”

He hated that stupid falsetto baby voice with a passion, but he also knew that she was lying. He had been working especially hard on his mental shields ever since he got here, and he hadn’t felt anyone

reach too far into his mind. Maybe she had gotten past his defenses for a single spell, but no further.

He smiled.

“Expelliarmus! Protego! Stupefy! Impedimenta! Diffindo!” Harry shouted, one after the other in quick succession, his feet moving on their own as he maneuvered past the light of her spells. His last curse hit Bellatrix squarely in the chest, slowing her movements before Harry sent a Cutting Curse directly at her.

Bellatrix recovered from the spell in time to lessen the lethal slice of magic aimed towards her face. Still, diffindo had cracked her mask down the middle, the lingering magic finishing the curse with a touch of melodrama. Her mask split into two equal parts and delicately fell off her face, kicking up stray dust as it hit the ground.

“Bellatrix Lestrange?!”

Harry saw Violet’s shocked, angry face out of the corner of his eye. A cruel smile twisted Bellatrix’s sunken features, the sadistic glint in her eyes negating any kind of beauty she may have retained. He frowned as he felt Violet’s feet shuffle beside him, surprised at the charge of magic surrounding her. His sister had most likely never met Bellatrix –if she had, she would have recognized her distinct voice immediately. Where was this rage coming from?

“Bitch!” Violet sneered as she threw her own Cutting Curse at Bellatrix. But she wasn’t focused, and her target was able to dodge the spell with ease.

“Aww, did I make little Potter mad? You’re not going to throw a tantrum on me, are you? Perhaps chuck a stuffed animal in my direction?” Bellatrix’s lips curled as she soaked in the desired effect she was having on Violet, who was practically boiling with rage.

Levicorpus! Harry thought while Bellatrix was distracted. BANG! Harry turned around and sent Violet a warning look. After he had disarmed Bellatrix, Harry demanded, “Why are you lot here? Looking

for some fun, were you?" His fingers were itching to cause her pain, but he suppressed the urge. He wasn't going to sink to her level.

"You'd like to think that, wouldn't you, baby Potter?"

He didn't like her tone. Her carefree arrogance suggested that she was in charge, that they were at her mercy and not the other way around. Feeling unnerved, he forced himself to stay cautious, to keep his ears open to approaching footsteps and dangerous spells.

"Maybe the blood's rushing to her head too fast," Violet suggested coldly. "Can I fix that?"

"No."

"Please, Harry?" she asked again, though her steady steps towards Bellatrix meant that she didn't really care for Harry's permission.

"Don't make me stun you!" Harry shouted warningly, making his first fatal mistake by turning his back completely on his captive. Violet's eyes widened and she had already shouted the incantation before Harry had time to react.

"CRUCIO!" Violet screamed, sending Bellatrix backwards and knocking away her wand yet again, which she had recovered using Wandless Magic.

Harry had about one and a half second's relief. When he had attempted that curse on Bellatrix out of vindicated fury and grief, it had only thrown her backwards because, according to her, he had to like causing pain and watching others suffer for the fun of it.

But his relief suddenly turned to horror as he witnessed Bellatrix writhing on the ground, her muffled screams and long, yellow fingernails tearing at her own flesh –

He turned to Violet, who wore a satisfied smirk, eyes glinting with the same look Bellatrix's had possessed only moments before.

He didn't know why he did what he did; it certainly wasn't for Bellatrix's sake. All that mattered as to efface that scarily pleased smile off Violet's face –besides, Bellatrix was no good to them as a shell. Harry shoved Violet aside, cutting off her concentration and leaving her victim twitching on the ground. But as his eyes trained back on her, he was disgusted to find that after panting a little and wiping the blood trickling down her chin, Bellatrix seemed unusually unfazed. He wasn't sure if Violet's spell just hadn't been powerful enough –or if she had actually liked the pain.

Sure enough, she was beginning to rise, grinning mockingly. Just as he had been about to stun her, he felt someone push him from behind.

"Why did you stop me?!" Violet demanded, her face contorted in anger.

"Later," Harry said, ignoring Violet's incoming protests and preparing to stun Bellatrix when something red shined in the corner of Harry's eye.

"Move!" he ordered, shoving her once again out of the way of incoming danger. Disorientated, Harry couldn't see anything. Then he realized that there was red smoke all around them.

"Stupefy! Stupefy! STUPEFY!" he shouted, shooting them in random directions. There was no way he was going to let Bellatrix go now; how many more lives will she take? But most importantly, Harry wanted to see Sirius's murderer brought to justice.

"Where are you, damn it!" Gaze fiery, he turned to Violet. "If you're going to mess things up, help me get her again!"

Violet nodded timidly, all fire and arrogance gone. Together, they randomly sent stunners into the blood colored haze. But it had completely blanketed itself around them; it was starting to feel almost solid. As it grew thicker, Harry found that it became harder to breathe, that something seemed to be compressing on his chest, that the distance his stunners traveled seemed to be decreasing.

“Screw this,” Harry muttered. “Reducto!” His spell gave them a clear path out of the eerily opaque area, but by the time they got out, all trace of both Bellatrix and the stunned and hanging Death Eaters was gone.

Harry swore loudly, not caring who heard. How could she have gotten away? How could maniacs like her run free while people he loved had died? His fists clenched, he angrily turned to Violet.

“What the bloody hell is wrong with you? You just let her get away! Can’t you control your temper?” He remembered his own anger in Dumbledore’s office, how he had thrown and kicked and raged –he remembered how empty he’d felt when all the damage had been done. “Why?” he asked quietly, suddenly too tired to feel bad about the hint of tears welling in Violet’s eyes. It faintly reminded Harry of first year, when Ron’s comment had made Hermione cry –though this was an entirely different situation altogether.

“You –you don’t know who she is, do you?” Violet asked quietly.

“Yeah, actually, I do,” Harry answered roughly. “Bellatrix Lestrangle.” And Sirius’s murderer.

“No kidding,” she said sarcastically. “I wasn’t sure if you knew –only reason I know is because I overheard some Aurors talking about it after the major Azkaban breakout –”

“What is it?” Harry interrupted, irritation rising again.

“She –Bellatrix Lestrangle –she was one of the people who tortured Mum and Dad after Neville defeated Voldemort. Mum was pregnant with me, but that didn’t stop them. Guess after it was over, she was afraid they’d killed me or something...” Violet never quite met Harry’s eyes. “Lucky, really, that Uncle Sirius and Uncle Remus were there – they’d gotten careless, you know, didn’t do the proper reconnaissance to know that they were in the area, really close. I think the Aurors said they’d gone out for take out and came back just in time to save Mum ‘n Dad –and me. Oh, and she’s Uncle Sirius’s cousin too –he really hates her, though I guess they were close when they were younger, before he chose the ‘blood traitors’ over them.”

Harry stared at her for a moment. So the Potters –like the Longbottoms –had been tortured by Bellatrix and her gang? But unlike the Longbottoms, they hadn't been tortured to insanity. He frowned; the timeline didn't match if Lily had been pregnant with Violet –unless they had been attacked later than Neville's parents. But that didn't matter right now; despite whatever her reasons were, she still let Bellatrix get away.

"Sectumsemptra!" A familiar voice echoed from somewhere to their right, in an alley. The siblings glanced at each other and took off running, quarrel forgotten.

When they skidded around the corner, wands out, they came upon a sickening sight. A girl lay crumpled on the ground, short, panicked gasps replacing her breath as the blood spilled from the pores of her face and upper body, creating a crimson pool around her. The girl's dark complexion was now almost completely covered in blood; he focused on her face, and recognized her.

Parvati Patil.

In a matter of seconds he had surveyed the situation, trying to stay calm as he noted Parvati's bleeding body and the Death Eater standing off to the side, his back to them. The monster seemed not to have noticed them, standing completely still and watching Parvati die, probably even enjoying it.

That is, until Harry noticed the figure's slumped shoulders and trembling hands, the discarded wand lying abandoned on the ground.

Quietly, Harry stunned the Death Eater, who hadn't bothered to fight back, merely accepting the immobility. This behavior puzzled him, but he pushed his confusion aside as he walked over to Parvati. "Watch him," he told Violet, who nodded and kicked the Death Eater's wand off to the side, training her own on him.

"Parvati?" Harry whispered, kneeling down next to her.

"H –Harry?" Parvati gasped, her voice rattling. She was close to death. "T –tell my p –parents..." She shuddered, looking unable to say much more. But she still attempted to give her message. "I t – tried to stop –Padma...Padma, she's..." Her eyes shifted to the side; Harry followed her gaze to see her twin's broken body lying at the far end of the alley.

"Tell them yourself," Harry told her sternly, voice breaking, a horrible knot twisting him inside. He'd been housemates, classmates, with Parvati for six years; Padma had been Ron's date to the Yule Ball – that meant something. Think, Harry, think! Harry suddenly remembered Malfoy, bleeding on the floor of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, his wounds exactly like Parvati's –and Snape, healing him somehow, with an incantation, but what was it? Damn it, he couldn't remember!

Harry's wand hovered over Parvati's face, willing his magic to heal her. Nothing happened. "C'mon!" he urged his wand, closing his eyes and trying again, thinking hard. Heal her, help her, make her well again, close the wounds, fix them, reverse Sectumsempra...Harry looked down at his wand in surprise.

A golden glow had issued from his wand, completely unlike what Snape had done, and the bleeding stopped. A warm feeling –hope– bubbled inside of him, as he repeated reverse Sectumsempra, reverse Sectumsempra, over and over again, concentrating hard on tapping the stores of magic inside both himself and his wand until the wounds had completely closed, until the only remnant of what had been done to her were the streaks of blood on her face. After he had finished, he moved on to the wounds on her chest, knowing that there was no time to pause and be embarrassed about where he was healing. At last, he'd closed up her remaining wounds, and sat back, extremely drained.

"Parvati?"

She tried to smile at him, but she still looked really weak. He must have looked puzzled, because Violet explained quietly, "She's lost a lot of blood."

Harry bit his lip, knowing they'd have to get her to St. Mungo's soon, before she dies. He found himself gazing at Padma's still body on the far side of the alley. "Watch her," he told Violet, who nodded grimly and recast the Stunning Spell on the Death Eater, just in case the original spell was weakening.

Glass crunched underneath Harry's shoes as he walked over the remains of telescopes and crystal balls, and he carefully evaded the various textbooks littered on the ground. After what felt like an eternity, he reached Padma.

There was no blood. The cuts and burns on her face, however, were definite signs of a struggle, and that she hadn't gone down without a fight. He didn't need to feel her pulse to know that she was dead; it wasn't the awkward, broken position of her body or the icy quality of her skin. No, it was the eyes –wide open, forever petrified with fear and regret.

Padma's death had been swift and clean, unlike Parvati's sadistic assailant, which led Harry to believe that there had been two Death Eaters; for whatever reason, one had lingered. Harry closed Padma's eyes and stood up, fists clenched, eyes blazing. He felt a strange sort of vindication, remembering Cedric. He had been young too. Not entirely in control of himself, he charged forward.

"Harry –" Violet protested, but Harry shoved her aside. Pushing the Death Eater up against the wall, he stepped on his feet, pointed his wand in his face, and removed the mask.

As the guise fell away, Harry suddenly reeled back in shock, though instinct kept his wand pointing at the man –boy, really. Without something to hold him up, the stunned Death Eater slumped to the ground, his white-blond hair falling into his eyes.

"Malfoy?"

“Malfoy?”

He couldn't believe this. Having experienced his cruelty first hand, he knew Malfoy was a slimeball –but he'd never thought Malfoy would be capable of such brutality, the disgusting Slytherin he is. Because of that fateful night, Harry had doubted his classmate's lack of redemption, for Malfoy had not been able to kill Dumbledore. He had been about to make his own choice, the right one.

Malfoy seemed shaken by the scene before him. Maybe somewhere on his frozen, Stunned expression, there was regret.

Harry didn't think Malfoy attacked both the Patils, which meant that another Death Eater or two could be lurking around. It wasn't safe to linger; if the Death Eaters found them there, they'd be sitting ducks. Besides, Parvati needed medical attention now.

“Can you levitate objects yet, like people?” Harry asked Violet suddenly. She seemed surprised at first by the brisk, hard tone in his voice and shook her head. “Just say ‘Locomotor’ and the object you want to levitate.”

After her confirming nod, Harry turned to Malfoy and Parvati. “Locomotor Parvati and Malfoy!” he said clearly, and waited for Violet to levitate Padma's body.

“What are we doing Harry? There are Death Eaters out there!”

“Aurors, too. Got a good chance that we'll run into one of the good guys. If not, we'll drop these three –Parvati gently –and fight them off, make so much noise that the Aurors can't not hear us. We're levitating people; we can't escape to Muggle London to find St. Mungo's ourselves,” he added, cutting off her incoming question.

Violet bit her lip but didn't argue.

“C'mon, got to be careful.” Harry walked in front of his charges and checked the street carefully. “Looks clear. Be ready to put up a Shield Charm.” Harry knew that a mere Shield Charm would not stop an

Unforgivable Curse, but Parvati was fading fast, and it was a risk he was willing to take.

They crept alongside the scarred brick walls, trying to stay in the shadows. It was hard trying to maneuver their charges and stay relatively hidden at the same time, but they managed.

Harry tapped on Violet's shoulder and indicated the next alleyway, hoping to cut into a different –and hopefully Death Eater free –area of Diagon alley. Once they were safely in the median, Harry took one second to turn his head to make sure Violet was okay when a large pair of hands suddenly grabbed his shoulder.

“Protego!” he shouted, sending the person rebounding into the street, where Harry got a good luck at him. He sighed in relief when the man lacked the traits of a Death Eater, though a scowl remained on his face. Still, one could never be too careful . . .

Harry raised his wand and pointed it at the man. “You a Death Eater?” he asked, allowing his eyes to scan the area for any others.

“No,” the man said coldly. “You’re the one with the floating bodies, little boy. You kill ‘em all?”

Violet bristled in indignation, insulted. “We saved them, you dolt. Do we look like Death Eaters? Well,” she sobered up a bit, “she was already dead. That one’s barely alive, and the one in dark robes is a Death Eater we found at the scene. Who’re you?”

“Auror,” the man said warily, casually standing up.

“Prove it,” Violet demanded, carefully putting down Padma’s body and pointing her wand at him too.

He scowled at her, as if unable to comprehend that this insolent little girl wasn’t listening to an authority, especially if they were allies. He pointed to his robes, which had the Auror crest emblazoned on it. While one hand was doing that, the other was casually drifting to his pocket –

“Expelliarmus!” Harry shouted, shooting the wand that had slipped partway into the man’s hand onto the other side of the sidewalk. “Stay where you are!” he roared as the man turned to retrieve it. Unfortunately for him, he didn’t stop.

“Stupefy!” The man crumpled to the ground. “Keep an eye on them,” he told Violet, going over to examine the man more carefully. He began examining the inner pockets of the robe, looking for some identification of some sort. Ah-ha, he thought as he picked up an I.D. However, he frowned, realizing that the face in the picture didn’t match the man lying on the ground.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, realizing that they’d almost been tricked. This Death Eater obviously wasn’t being too cautious if he hadn’t changed the picture on the I.D. Could no one be trusted here? Guess they can’t just rely on finding someone who looks like an Auror anymore . . . they’d have to find someone that they recognized, like Kingsley, Tonks or his parents.

Harry involuntarily ran a hand through his disheveled hair, brushing some dust into his face. His fingers flexed involuntarily, irritated with the situation and his helplessness, his reliance on dumb luck. He deliberated for a few seconds about what to do with the Death Eater. He couldn’t just leave him here; there was no telling whether or not he would come after them again, and letting him rejoin his mates wasn’t an option.

Harry sighed. Looks like they’ve got another one in tow, then.

CRUNCH.

“Stupefy!” The red beam rebounded back at Harry, which he dodged easily.

“IMPEDIMENTA!” Harry bellowed, sending sparks in the rough location of the voice. “Run, Violet!” With a flick of his wand, he re-levitated Parvati and Malfoy before running right on Violet’s heel, shouting various curses behind him every few seconds.

They raced up the dark alley, the aged bricks surrounding them seeming to stretch on forever. Harry felt his own exhaustion from maintaining the levitation, but he couldn't leave them there, not with their pursuers right behind them.

Even through the adrenaline, Harry could hear the stampeding footsteps advancing on them. Damn it! They were vulnerable in this narrow area. Thinking fast, Harry quickly flicked his wand at claustrophobic walls around them, sending the bricks crashing down in a huge cloud of dust. Harry held his breath as long as he could until they cleared the dust –he almost thought that they were out of the danger zone.

Almost.

Just as they finally reached the end of the alley, a flash of numerous dark robes blocked their way, at least four wands aimed in their direction. Anticipating what was going to happen, Harry shouted "PROTEGO," manipulating the shield to appear further up, in front of Violet. Following his lead, Violet placed a shield of her own to strengthen their defense.

A blindingly red blast of various stunners came their way, ricocheting off the combination of their two shields. Harry was trying to think: how were they going to get past all of those Death Eaters, especially handicapped with their charges? He had half a mind to drop them all there and save Violet and himself (he really wouldn't mind leaving Malfoy behind) –but he remembered Padma's vacated eyes and Parvati's failing condition. No, he could not leave them in the hands of these people in good conscience.

"The shield's faltering!"

"PROTEGO! Keep redoing it!" Harry shouted back, his throat aching and ears throbbing from the shrill of spells hitting the shield.

For what seemed like forever, it had become an exhausting exchange of spells bouncing off the shield, which kept on being reapplied. Even though they had ceased levitating their charges long ago, Harry felt both magically and physically drained. He wasn't sure if his

endurance would outlast that of the more numerous others at the end of the obscure alley.

Finally, the spells stopped coming. Harry allowed his arm to rest at his side, but kept his senses ready for quick action if needed. All of his muscles ached in protest of the constant spellwork and battles; he doubted that he and Violet could last through another barrage of spells. Slightly in front of him, Violet, too, was breathing heavily, her legs shaking slightly. She looked like she was going to collapse any second.

“Put your wands on the ground!” A loud, booming voice echoed in the alley. “I repeat: put your wands on the ground!”

“You put your wands on the ground!” Harry retorted, unsure if they could even distinguish his words through his hoarse voice. He knew his comeback was a little childish, but honestly, he was too tired to think of anything better. Like hell he was going to disarm himself willingly; what a bunch of sodding idiots.

The boom was back. “Identify yourselves!”

Harry frowned. These guys sounded like Aurors; but then again, so did the Stunned lump lying on the floor, and he ended up being a Death Eater. But still, could all those people be Death Eaters in disguise? Well, better be safe than sorry.

“Identify yourselves!”

A pause. Harry could practically hear their impatience as the still air broke with the vibrations of the *Sonorus* spell. “The Dark Wizard Catching Task Force orders you to identify yourselves immediately or face the consequences!”

Why can't they just say “Aurors”? Harry found himself wondering somewhat deliriously. His head was starting to throb; but he needed proof. Would it hurt if he gave away his name? It's not like Voldemort wanted Harry's head on a platter in this world, place, whatever. Still, the risk was high that retaliation would come . . .

“We’re Hogwarts students!”

Harry looked at Violet sharply, but she merely gave him a look clearly stating that she knew what she was doing. At least, he hoped she did. Harry listened closely to her words, prepared to jump in if needed.

“We were shopping for school supplies and got caught up in this.”

She turned around to Harry, hesitating, unsure of what to say next. Guess she didn’t really know what she was doing beyond that point. Harry narrowed his eyes in the direction of the supposed Aurors as more footsteps advanced towards them, probably reinforcements.

“We found two girls in an alley; the Death Eaters had already gotten to them. One’s dead.” Harry continued loudly, careful with his words. He got Violet’s attention and tilted his head at their two Death Eater prisoners, trying to get her to block them from view. If these Aurors were fakes, he didn’t want them to know that they had two of their own captive.

“HARRY?”

His head immediately snapped his head back towards the Aurors, surprised that someone had recognized his voice. Surely they couldn’t see them very well through the hazy surface of the shield? He didn’t respond immediately, but squinted at the shadows. Vaguely, he could make out two shadows trying to part the others, fighting its way towards them.

“HARRY JAMES POTTER, LOWER THAT SHIELD RIGHT NOW!”

He cringed involuntarily, immediately recognizing the new female voice. Well, that settled it; these people were definitely Aurors. Harry flicked his wand, canceling whatever was left of both his and Violet’s weakened defense. However, despite his reassurances that no one else in the world, Polyjuice or no, could put that much anger and maternal relief into Lily Potter’s voice but Lily Potter, instinct still kept Harry’s grip on his wand tight, prepared for any sign of trouble.

Lily and James Potter, who were part of the reinforcements Harry had heard approaching, rushed over to their children, though the four bodies lying near them did not escape their notice.

Before they could ask, Harry said quickly. "Parvati's badly hurt, she got hit with Sectu –er, I mean, some spell, and she was bleeding everywhere. I managed to stop it, but she still lost a lot of blood –she needs to go tot St. Mungo's right now."

James nodded and beckoned a young looking Auror over to them. "Apparate her to St. Mungo's and admit her into the emergency ward immediately –it doesn't look like she'll last long. Hurry!" The Auror nodded briskly and lightly touched her arm, Disapparating with a CRACK a split second later. James opened his mouth, about to ask about the other girl, but the look in Harry's eyes stopped him. Instead, he walked over to the other's body, feeling Harry's gaze on him all the way, and felt her pulse, though he knew she was dead from the moment he touched her icy skin.

Despite the rhythm of shoes making their way towards them, it seemed eerily silent. "You Stunned an Auror?" Lily asked incredulously, gesturing towards the imposter.

"How'd you know he was Stunned?" Violet asked, surprised.

Lily shrugged. "You see enough of both, you start to distinguish them. Not that it's an excessive amount!" she added quickly at the look on Violet's face.

The mention of the false Auror brought Harry's attention back towards a not so minor detail: Malfoy. "We found a Death Eater standing near Parvati and . . . and Padma. I don't think he killed Padma, but it looks like he's the one who hurt Parvati. It's Draco Malfoy."

James's face suddenly darkened, a nasty scowl emerging on his face, one that Harry recognized as similar to Snape's expression whenever he looked at Harry. "Malfoy? As in Lucius's son?"

But instead of waiting for an answer, James approached Malfoy and roughly grabbed a fistful of platinum blonde hair, yanking his head up so he was level with him.

“James!” Lily reprimanded sharply, but he didn’t listen.

“What’s your slimy git of a father got you doing now? Taught you the arts of torture, did he? You and I both know Voldemort wasn’t just out for some random fun . . . what was he trying to do? Damn it, answer me!”

“Potter, he’s Stunned,” the booming Auror reminded him. “We’ve still got possible Death Eaters around, and we’ve wasted enough manpower on this. Bring him and the other to HQ –interrogate them there. It’s not safe here.” He scrutinized Violet and Harry’s fatigue and wounds before adding, “Take the kids too –they can get patched up there. Lily, it’s up to you –we could use the manpower, but if you feel like you’ve got to take care of your children –d”

Lily nodded. “Thanks. But if things really get bad, owl us.”

The Auror nodded. “We will.” He turned to rejoin the rest of his squadron, but briefly turned back to Harry and Violet. “Good work,” he said before disappearing around the corner, the billowing of his robes rivaling even Snape’s.

“I’ll ask again. What was Voldemort doing in Diagon Alley?”

Malfoy turned his head away, refusing to look into James Potter’s eyes. James scrutinized the Death Eater’s body language, watched the way he never looked at James, how his hands firmly, spastically gripped the cold metal chair his arms were enclosed in, how sweat dripped from his pale nose, the shadows in his eyes that gave him an almost sickly, delirious look.

In other words, he didn’t seem like the snobby, malicious son of a Death Eater aristocrat.

James almost found himself sympathizing with Malfoy; under the bright lights, Malfoy seemed vulnerable, a child. He found that he had

to remind himself that this was a hardened Death Eater as he tried to extract information out of him. James knew that there was still the interrogation going on with the other Death Eater elsewhere, but he felt that Malfoy would be the most likely to spill. He knew he had to break him down, break his confidence in the Dark Lord or any impending rescue from his influential father. Which is why his capture was extremely confidential, known only to a select few, who James himself had ensured were only Aurors in the Order.

He slammed his hands on the metal enclosing Malfoy's hands hard, letting the echo resonate throughout the room before continuing. "Listen, both you and I know that Voldemort isn't coming for you – don't flinch like that, you're his bloody servant . . ."

Malfoy muttered something incoherent, his eyes still fixated on the foreboding walls, recognizing that his freedom was on the other side, out of reach. What Malfoy didn't know was that the remaining three Potters and two Aurors were watching, recording everything, and sometimes giving suggestions into James's ear through a magical connection.

"What was that?" James asked sharply when Malfoy didn't repeat what he had said.

"I'm expendable; I know that," Malfoy repeated softly. "Everyone is."

Maybe James wouldn't have to break his spirit after all. "You're right. Voldemort doesn't care about anybody but himself. You, your father, your mother...you're all pawns –bloody useful when needed, but no need to give a thought to it when he cuts you loose. If anything, he may have a man make sure that you never talk." James let his gaze rest on his pallid face for a moment, willing him to look up. When he saw a person's eyes, it's a lot easier to tell whether or not he's getting to them.

Malfoy's breath became hitched and James caught some uncontrolled gasps, though the kid seemed to be trying his best to get it under control. "We can help you, you know –give you protection, give your family protection. That's what you're worried about, isn't it?" James added. Malfoy's rigid movements at the mention of his family

gave away exactly what his dilemma was. Death Eater or not, this was still a scared teenager in front of him, and it was a delicate balance James needed to walk.

“You can’t help me.”

But the desperation in his voice indicated that he wanted them to.

We’re not getting anywhere with this, Kingsley Shacklebolt’s voice rang in his ear, move on to the two girls, see if there’s any remorse. If so, then we have something to work with.

James frowned. True, but what if that causes him to close up?

Then we’ll start over. Tonks and I are willing to stay as long as possible to get that information.

I second that!

James, if this goes on too long, I’m taking the kids home, Lily said, joining the conversation.

James took a moment to agree with his wife’s statement before turning his attention back to the interrogation. It’d probably be better if Harry and Violet leave soon –he didn’t want them to see if he had to resort to extreme measures, though certain of them are off limits. Despite the fact that Aurors are allowed to use Unforgivable Curses on prisoners, James had made an oath to never do that. If he did, what good was it? It’d make him just like them and lower him to the barbaric levels of the Death Eaters. When the good guys, the justified, starts using Unforgivables, the lines get blurred, and who’s to say that the thrill of their use won’t get to people’s heads? What will happen to the cause, to the morality they were supposed to protect if the Aurors essentially became a group of Ministry Death Eaters? There was a certain moral line that they had to draw to differentiate themselves from the Dark, and James refused to cross it.

“Let’s talk about the Patil twins,” James said suddenly, hoping to catch Malfoy off guard.

He got the desired effect. Malfoy finally met eyes, and a deep, nasty scowl crossed his face, the first aggressive sign he had shown so far in the interrogation. "Let's not," he snarled, the vulnerability gone.

"You don't get a choice," James retorted coldly, adjusting his techniques to Malfoy's mood swing.

"I don't have to talk to you."

This sudden burst of hostility was part of Malfoy's defense mechanism, which meant that James was getting to him. Normally, the best time to get information out of someone is to throw them off kilter and anger them so much that they just spit the answer right in your face. Unfortunately, especially with the better trained Death Eaters, that usually isn't as easy as it is in Muggle cinema. But the clear instability of Draco's current emotional instability and the fact that he probably has had less practice with interrogations than the more experienced Death Eaters, that technique may just work with the kid.

"Did you kill Padma Patil?"

Malfoy looked away again. "No."

"I can't tell if you're lying or not unless you look at me."

"Piss off."

"Not an option. What about Parvati? Did you perform a spell on her, torture her?"

"No," Malfoy said, gritting his teeth together hard while his balled fists shook involuntarily, as if trying to squeeze the memory out of them.

"Now I know you're lying to me. I don't like liars, Malfoy. Makes you untrustworthy."

"YOU'RE THE BLOODY UNTRUSTWORTHY ONE!" Malfoy screamed, sending spit flying onto James's right cheek.

James cocked one eyebrow. "Really?" he said calmly. "Why am I untrustworthy?"

Malfoy took a deep breath in attempts to control his breathing. So the mini Death Eater did have some interrogation skills after all.

"I have a right to a council," he said at last.

James leaned forward until he noticed the kid shrinking back a little. "This isn't some inane case out of a History of Magic textbook, Malfoy; you're a criminal, a Death Eater, and a possibly sadistic murderer...sorry, but the truth is there aren't many options for you. Not unless you stop lying and diverting me and answer my questions –truthfully."

"I'm underage," Malfoy sputtered. "You –you're not allowed to –"

"Yeah, well, torturing and murdering people are also illegal, Malfoy, but it seems that you and your dear master have no qualms about that."

"You don't know anything," the boy said, shaking his damp blonde head. "You're a Potter, a sheltered, arrogant, show off bastard who knows nothing about suffering..."

James suddenly found his wand half out of his pocket. Closing his eyes for a moment, he regained his posture, waving the insult aside, though he wasn't sure if Malfoy was talking about James specifically.

"You talking about me or my son?" he asked sharply, allowing a twinge of anger to seep out.

Malfoy's nostrils flared as he looked up at James, malice sparkling in his eyes. "The whole bloody litter."

Harry's hands clenched tightly at this. Seems like Malfoy is the same as ever, with illusions that Harry actually did things to get attention, that he was some smug prat; hypocritically, all the accusations he's thrown at him, all the names he's called Harry really applied to himself, the heir of the Malfoy estate.

“Mum,” he said suddenly. “I want to talk to Malfoy.”

The other four occupants of the room turned swiftly towards him. “Out of the question,” Lily said firmly. “He’s dangerous, and I’m not taking that risk. Besides, you’ve had enough excitement for today.”

“Mum, Harry’s the one who caught him,” Violet pointed out. “And he went to school with him for six years –he can probably get information out of him better than anyone else. I mean, they both definitely know how to provoke the other.”

“Yes, I remember the mountain of letters we’ve received over the years about the duels Harry got himself into,” Lily said dryly. “We appreciate that you turned over two Death Eaters and brought Parvati Patil medical attention but –”

“But it’s not enough,” Harry interrupted. “We only got things half done, I need to talk to him.”

“Harry, you might make it worse,” Kingsley said gently. “If there is a lot of bad blood between you two it might make him more determined to keep you out of the loop.”

“Then we’ll start over again,” Violet said, mimicking Kingsley’s words when James had asked that question. It surprised Harry that Violet would so willingly vouch for him with such fervor. If anything, he’d think that she would want to come in with him, but it seemed that she only wanted to help Harry get his request.

“We’ll do nothing,” Lily insisted, maternal authority in her voice. “And how do you know what Kingsley said to Dad anyway?”

Tonks raised her hand, accidentally sending her pen flying into the opposite wall. “I thought they would want to be involved with the interrogation too –they’ve proven themselves enough.” She beamed at them.

Lily sighed. Too tired to fight this, she pitched the idea to James, trying to channel a great big “NO” into his brain; if the interrogator

rejected Harry's idea, then it'd definitely be the last word. James, Harry wants to question Malfoy.

Okay.

WHAT?!

Well, they have history –bad history, I know, but still history –so he knows how to talk to him. C'mon Lily, you know how manipulative Harry can be sometimes –

I am?

Remember the Christmas guilt trip a few years ago?

Er . . . sure.

Well there you go. I think it's worth a try. I'll stand in, wand ready –I wouldn't let him in if I thought it'd endanger him.

Lily wanted to strangle her husband. How could he be so thick as to put their son in there with a Death Eater! Merlin, why hadn't she listened to the maternal instincts that had told her to drag Harry and Violet out of there before anything could come out of Harry's request? She had half a mind to do that now, despite the avid protests that were sure to come, but she also thought James was partially right. Maybe this could really help shed light on what Voldemort was doing in Diagon Alley.

Kingsley, Tonks? Lily asked desperately. Do you agree with this?

Both did. "Don't worry, Lily, you know James won't let anything happen to Harry while he's in there," Tonks reassured her.

She was not convinced.

However, Harry was already crossing the room to where he saw James enter the room. He tried turning the knob like usual, but found that it was stuck fast. Er –how do I get in?

Password, Lily answered, though the tone of her voice indicated that she had no intention of telling him what it was.

However, Tonks was willing to share that bit of information, and Harry stepped into the interrogation room. It was rather foreboding, he decided, and was definitely not a friendly environment, which would have to do in order to serve its purpose. In the middle of the room, James stepped a few good feet away from Malfoy before extracting his wand, keeping it pointed at the blonde before stepping back to Harry.

“Don’t try to push him too hard, Harry,” he warned, “Make sure your wand is safe where he can’t take it, and step back immediately if you feel like you’re in danger. Don’t make it personal, but you can use it if you feel it’s to your advantage. Remember: just get the information, don’t gloat or anything.”

Harry nodded, wondering if the Harry of this place actually was a slight braggart.

“Okay,” James said, a shadow of worry lines creasing his face, “Just remember that I’m right here. Your safety is first priority, okay?” He frowned as if he were second guessing his decision, so before he could, Harry nodded and walked over to Malfoy, pulling up a chair, spinning it around, and sitting so he was level with the blonde.

Harry wasn’t exactly sure why he was doing this; maybe it was that innate urge to take action coming over him again, or the fact that he could get a lot of useful information from this. Maybe it was an additional instinct to gain trust from the people of this place, just in case anything went wrong.

However, he was taking a risk doing this, especially since he knew information that he possibly should not know, like the details of the night of Dumbledore’s death . . . well, he supposed he could chalk it up to Hogwarts gossip, but even that gets twisted in retellings. Actually, he had no idea if the stuff he knew even happened here, but he had to take a chance if he was going to get anything useful out of Malfoy.

The prisoner in question was staring at him, looking slightly confused as to why an ex-classmate and rival was talking to him. Harry rested his arms on the chair backing, looking straight into those grey eyes. After a few seconds deliberation, he raised his feeble mind shields in an attempt to keep anyone from looking through his mind while he was distracted, and lowered his voice so only Malfoy could hear him.

“On the tower, you lowered your wand; you weren’t going to kill Dumbledore. Why?”

Malfoy’s neutrality dropped immediately as his mouth fell open slightly, his eyes widening in fear and surprise. Then he seemed to come to himself, instantly shutting his mouth rapidly, the clank of his teeth grinding together echoing slightly. His face closed off and he narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Potter.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Harry pressed further, encouraged by Malfoy’s negative reaction. Was Malfoy always this bad a liar?

“If I weren’t stuck in this chair, I wouldn’t hesitate to curse you,” he sneered, trying to get the upper hand back.

Harry smiled dryly. “I don’t doubt it. So, you going to tell me if you were going to take Professor Dumbledore’s offer for help or not?” Harry made every attempt to make his voice calm and casual, almost as if this were a conversation about the weather. He figured Malfoy was rattled enough; he just needed a dose of reality. Plus, if Malfoy got worked up, Harry might too, and there’d be shouting and any slips that are extremely likely come out would be really bad.

Malfoy regarded Harry warily. “I would never take anything from Muggle loving scum like Dumbledore,” he said half-heartedly.

“You didn’t even try,” Harry pointed out, frowning. “I figured Snape or someone would have trained you better than that.” What happened to the kid who broke Harry’s nose on the train sixth year? He tried not to flinch at the memory –not exactly one of the best moments for either of them.

Harry cast his mind around to find way to get an answer for something that would benefit both the Aurors and Harry's desire for information on the current situation. Well, no matter what Malfoy said, it had looked like he wanted to take Dumbledore's offer that night.

He noticed James looking at him strangely, probably wondering why they were talking in such low voices. However, James didn't say anything, so he probably trusted that Harry was making some progress. He wished he were.

"Why'd you kill Padma?" Harry attacked suddenly, watching his reaction closely. First, he needed to see if his suspicions were right, that Malfoy really hadn't killed Padma –or if he at least felt regret about it.

As expected, Malfoy stiffened. "I didn't."

"Okay."

"Okay? That's all you're going to say, 'okay'?"

"I believe you."

"You believe me?!"

Harry frowned, peeved. "You know, repeating everything I say is getting annoying. Do you want to be incriminated?"

Malfoy couldn't hide his surprise, and as much as he wanted to, there was a glimmer of hope in his eyes. It sort of made sense, since James had been trying to intimidate the information out of him before; Harry suspected that he hadn't responded to that tactic because Voldemort proved to be a much more menacing entity than James Potter. A couple of hours in a cell with an Auror were nothing compared to ten seconds under Voldemort's Cruciatus Curse.

As dense as Malfoy was currently being, Harry knew that this was the only way to get anything out of him. After all, an offer for help almost saved both him and Professor Dumbledore –Harry flinched at the

mental image of the Headmaster's body falling towards the ground – from the situation they were currently in.

Harry decided to move on; he noticed James looking a bit fidgety, and figured he didn't have much time left until his parents had it with the danger and bodily dragged him out of the interrogation room.

"What about Parvati?" Harry asked suddenly, once again catching Malfoy off guard. He'd never seen the blonde this jumpy before. Harry considered adding something about Sectumsempra, but realized that it would be too dangerous.

"I didn't kill her," Malfoy muttered.

"But you attacked her."

Malfoy hesitated.

"Lying won't help."

But Malfoy didn't trust him. "You're a bloody Potter, a filthy blood traitor who'd sell me out in a sec –" Malfoy's sentence was cut off as he sputtered and tried to spit out the bucketful of water that had been thrown into his big, open mouth.

Harry resisted the laugh that bubbled in his chest, still holding onto the water bucket that he had just conjured seconds before. "Liked that, did you?" Harry couldn't resist saying, "Wiped the slime off a bit, that's for sure."

Malfoy glared, water still dripping off of his hair, turned darker with the water, which in itself hadn't been particularly clean. He looked about ready to rear up and attack Harry. He did attempt to shake his arms menacingly, but it didn't have much of an effect, considering the fact that they were encased in steel.

"I'll kill you," Malfoy growled.

Harry leaned forward, suddenly serious again. "I don't think you can. You're not a killer; you don't have it in you." In that moment, eyes

wide, Harry realized something. "You're nothing but a common bully, Malfoy, nothing but another Dudley Dursley. Only difference is that Dudley had his fists and big friends to rely on –you have Daddy's pocket change."

Somewhat expectedly, Malfoy attempted to launch himself from his chair, but only made it about an inch forward. "I'm better than any of you or any of your blood traitor, half-blood or Mudblood friends!" he said fiercely, though he sounded as if he were also trying to convince himself, "You're nothing!"

Looking at him, Harry felt a twinge of sorrow. "I'm not the one trapped in a steel chair," he said quietly, without spite.

That shut Malfoy up. Anger blazed in his cold grey eyes for a moment, but the flames dwindled until they held an almost hollow look. He looked away, and Harry knew that he would lose whatever little cooperation he had soon.

"Malfoy –Malfoy. Draco?"

He looked up reluctantly, the sharp, authoritative tone in Harry's voice causing an obedience instinct to flare up.

"What did Voldemort want in Diagon Alley?"

He didn't answer.

"Just tell me, and we'll help; the Ministry, Dumbledore . . ."

Malfoy suddenly went rigid, his face paling more than usual. "Dumbledore's dead." He said firmly. "He's dead; Professor Snape killed him . . ."

"You know what I mean," Harry said, "Dumbledore's people, his supporters, the good guys. He was willing to help you before, why can't you trust his memory now?"

"Only when I held a wand to him!"

“Because he knew that being a Death Eater would destroy you,” Harry retorted, his temper flaring. How dare Malfoy disrespect Professor Dumbledore’s memory? Dumbledore, who had offered him help, who’d known about Malfoy’s plans for most of the school year, but did nothing to stop it because of the threat Malfoy was under . . . Dumbledore, who always gave second chances.

“He tried to help you,” Harry said, his tone dangerous; he didn’t notice that his voice was getting progressively louder, his flimsy Occlumency shields disappearing the angrier he got, the more his fists shook with rage. “He tried to save you and your family! And you’re going to throw it back in his face by killing his students, by refusing to help us when you have the chance! You don’t like Voldemort, that much is obvious –you’re a prick, you’re selfish, you’re a bully, you like having someone bigger protecting you, like Wormtail –but you’re also a coward. You’re nothing but a big BLOODY COWARD!”

“HARRY!” James suddenly grabbed Harry’s arm and dragged him across the room. “That’s enough!” Looking tired and stern, they left an unusually quiet Malfoy behind, shutting the steel door behind them and reactivating the magical wards.

Immediately, Harry was assaulted by Lily, who looked torn between lecturing and embracing him. She compromised by squashing him in a bone breaking hug while snapping at him all the while. “You promised you’d keep control in there, Harry! I thought Malfoy was going to bite your nose off –”

“Congratulations, Harry,” a deep voice said from behind Lily.

“Er –what?” Harry asked, confused. Everyone else looked angry beyond belief at him, despite the fact that he felt something had come out of it; what, exactly, he wasn’t sure, but something.

Kingsley had been the one who had spoken, with Tonks smiling in approval next to him. “You laid the seeds for a deal to be made,” Tonks explained, noticing Lily’s confused glance. “Look at him; I think your words really hit him hard.”

“So are you going to use Veritaserum on him? Wait, why didn’t you use it on him in the first place?” Harry asked.

“He’s a minor,” James explained. “We’re not allowed to use it on him without parental consent, and well –I doubt that’d work out. We’re not above the law, Harry, and I refuse to sink down that low. That saved my life once, remember? I alone was spared of the team because I wasn’t willing to use the Cruciatus on a prisoner, who broke out later and unfortunately got revenge on . . . on the others.”

Harry had to agree. Malfoy’s trust in them would be destroyed beyond repair if they did that, especially if he knew the law, which he probably did, considering who his father was.

“Enough of this,” Lily ordered. “You’re all tired, it’s been a traumatic day, and you two are going home now. No arguing, young lady,” she added as Violet opened her mouth to protest. “And you’re going to keep Harry’s part in this off the books?” she added to Tonks, who nodded. After saying good-bye, the Potter family turned to leave when a voice stopped them.

“Before you go –Harry, how did you know the details about Albus Dumbledore’s death?” Kingsley asked. Harry stiffened, but he realized that he was just asking out of curiosity, not suspicion.

“Gossip,” Harry replied simply, as if that was all the explanation needed.

“Summer holiday’s gone by fast, hasn’t it?”

Harry blinked. “What?” His mind had been on the lack of information he had found about this place. There were a lot of yellow editions of the Daily Prophet about Neville, proclaiming him the Boy-Who-Lived and announcing that his grandmother had custody of him. After really thinking about it, it confused Harry about why Neville’s grandmother on his father’s side would take care of him if his mother had made the sacrifice. But then, maybe the details were switched and it was Frank Longbottom to whom the blood protection could be attributed to, or both. Maybe they hadn’t had as much of an opportunity to fight or flee

as Harry's parents had, and even then it hadn't been a substantial amount of time.

Harry had even gone to the Ministry of Magic with James, snuck off while he was called to a false meeting by a memo that Harry had written and bewitched. It was then that Harry had gotten into the actual Daily Prophet archives to search for the desired information. Strangely enough, a lot of those had been missing there, at the source, which had led Harry to believe that there was a lot more corruption in the Daily Prophet than he'd originally thought. Perhaps there were merely unorganized...either way, it hadn't helped Harry, but merely earned him a lecture for leaving the Magical Law Enforcement department against James's orders.

Essentially, there had been far too many gaps in the official archives to really piece together everything, though judging by the current, far too optimistic articles, the Daily Prophet as it is now cannot be trusted to provide the whole truth. Harry would just have to wait until he had access to the Hogwarts library –surely they would have a more extensive archive.

He hadn't realized that he had once again tuned Violet out until she actually poked the side of his head. "Harry, you're daydreaming again."

"What?" Harry scowled, not exactly in the greatest of moods. They had just found out today the results from the interrogation ages ago, but only after a lot of nagging, begging, and guilt inducing on Violet's part. Harry, though he asked them for the results, didn't feel comfortable enough to actually join Violet in the whining.

Lily and James hadn't wanted to tell them anything, especially after Harry's outburst last time. However, eventually they caved in the morning prior to when they had to leave for Hogwarts.

"It really bothers me," Violet commented, as if reading exactly what was on Harry's mind, "that there's a huge, large scale attack about to happen that we can't do anything about. I mean, how can the Death Eater not know when or where it's gonna happen?"

“He’s too low –a grunt,” Harry explained easily. “If this was as big as he says, only those at the top would know.” Harry hesitated. “Malfoy knows, I think –cause of his Dad, but according to Mum, he isn’t talking...”

Violet shrugged. “They could have just used Veritaserum, but morals got in the way –”

“You say that like it’s bad,” Harry commented, frowning. “It’s not. Besides, didn’t Dad say that Veritaserum hadn’t worked on Malfoy when the Minister had made him give it to him? His mind was too strong, and Veritaserum has its limits on who it’ll work on.”

Violet’s expression darkened as she propped her shoes on Harry’s bed absently, not acknowledging him as he shoved her feet off the sheets, leaving clumps of dirt where her shoes had been. “Dad could have given it to him during your row with Malfoy. That really got to him –especially the water. Would have been vulnerable then. But nooo . . . it would have been morally improper.”

“Our side’s got to keep their principles intact –”

“This is war.”

“Sink to the Death Eaters’ level, we become them.”

Violet pursed her lips, staring at Harry strangely. “Hmm. Guess you don’t believe in sacrifice?”

Harry felt ripples of anger inside him. Him, not believe in sacrifice? His whole bloody life has been filled with it, filled with people dying for him, because of him; in becoming the Boy-Who-Lived, any semblance of a normal life was gone, sacrificed for the good of the wizarding world.

Violet observed the anger and bitterness in Harry’s expressive green eyes with interest. “What, something bothering you?” she asked, taking on a somewhat sly tone.

Harry glared at her. "Should probably sleep," he said off handily. "Hogwarts tomorrow and all."

She didn't say anything for a moment, still observing him in an almost calculating manner. "All right," she said at last. "Night, then."

With that, she got up and walked towards the door, flipping her Weasley-rivaled hair behind her as the door closed with a click.

"I can't wait for Christmas holiday already," Lily pronounced, eyes bright against the background of the Hogwarts Express's black smoke.

"I think pregnancy's made you emotional, dear," James said sweetly. "Usually we can't wait to get rid of these two."

Violet scowled playfully. "No Christmas presents for you, then."

James smirked. "Likewise. But I still think I merit a goodbye hug at the very least, don't you think?"

Pausing for a few full seconds, pondering this, Violet at last broke into a smile and hugged her father tightly before hugging her mother as well. After she was done, Harry also said his goodbyes. Though he was relieved to be going somewhere familiar, where tons of resources were available for him (definitely more helpful than the stuff he had discovered –or rather, had not discovered). However, he found himself missing the homely comforts of the Potter house, as well as the parents he never got to know. Harry had promised himself that he wouldn't get attached and well –it looks like he had failed miserably.

Nevertheless, he knew his priority was his world, so he would do everything in his power to get back.

Harry turned to walk towards the train when he was suddenly assaulted by a mass of red hair.

"Wha –" he quickly turned around, wondering why Violet was attacking him when he saw her standing off to the side, looking

amused. The redhead clutching onto him looked up, causing Harry's face to automatically light up at the sight of Ginny Weasley.

"Hey Harry," she said, letting go of him. "How was your summer?"

"Eventful," Harry responded easily, the fact that this wasn't necessarily his Ginny completely slipping his mind.

Ginny ran a sheepish hand through her hair. "Sorry I didn't owl that much –Errol got some sort of sickness and can't do much now, and Ron refuses to let me use Pig." Ginny suddenly scowled. "My brother's being an overprotective git, he is. And he usually gets along just fine with you too."

Harry suddenly remembered Ron's hostile letter. Guess he really was just another Dean Thomas to his best friend now . . .

"How was Egypt, Gin?" Violet broke in during Harry's lapse of speech. "They let you go into the cursed tombs this time?"

Ginny wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, some if it was disgusting. Plus, the cost of international owl post over there is really expensive..." she trailed off, blushing in embarrassment. "But I did bring your birthday present with me, Harry, so you've got to open it later."

"Ginny dear, the train's about to leave," the familiar voice of Mrs. Weasley said worriedly as she and a reluctant Ron walked over to them. "Hello, Harry, had a nice summer? Oh, and Lily, James, how are you? Good? I heard there was a nasty Death Eater attack on Diagon Alley while we were gone...oh, that's unfortunate. The Patils were always very nice people."

Harry frowned, wondering why she was treating the Potters somewhat distantly when he remembered that Order members weren't supposed to call much attention to themselves if they normally didn't talk, like how Kingsley and Mr. Weasley had greeted each other before Harry's trial prior to fifth year.

Sure enough, Mrs. Weasley had discreetly muttered something inaudible as she was passing them towards the barrier. "Have a good term, everyone," she said before disappearing.

"Shall we?" Ginny said, picking up her things.

Harry couldn't help but notice Ron glaring at him out of the corner of his eye.

This unnerved him greatly, for the last time he remembered things being this frosty between Ron and him was during fourth year, because of the Triwizard Tournament. Harry's thoughts preoccupied him as they ascended the steps off the platform and into the Hogwarts Express.

"Harry?" Violet's voice broke him out of his reverie. "Aren't you supposed to be in the Head compartment?"

It took Harry a few seconds to remember the Head Boy badge tucked away inside his trunk. "Oh...right. See you later, then."

Ginny and Violet nodded as they separated in the corridor. Actually, Harry had no bloody idea where the Head compartment was, but after a bit of scanning, he found it fairly quickly. The brass plaque on the door made it easy to identify.

As he slid the door open, Harry registered an extremely familiar bush of brown hair sitting next to the window, a large book predictably resting on her lap.

"Hermione!" he said happily, hoping that at least one of his best friends didn't resent him—

No such luck.

“Potter,” Hermione said coldly, uttering his surname as if it was something distasteful on her tongue.

Harry was taken aback by this frosty greeting. He could rationalize why Ron disliked him at the moment, but Hermione? What’d he done to her?

“Er . . . something the matter?” Harry asked, unable to think of anything smarter to say.

Coolly, Hermione looked up from her book, snapping its heavy cover shut before addressing Harry. “Look, we may have to work together, but that doesn’t mean I like you, Potter. I don’t care if you’ve been trying to be nice to me to my face –you think I could ever forgive you for bewitching me, making me look like a fool in front of the entire school? I should think not,” she said stiffly, turning away from him to read again, now determinedly ignoring him.

Frankly, this stunned him a bit. Why would Harry ever humiliate Hermione? But then, it was obvious they weren’t friends here –maybe Harry had inherited the Marauder genes, and had gone too far on a prank. But from what he gathered from living with the Potters, Violet had actually been the one more prone to playing pranks on people, not Harry. Plus, whether this place’s Harry was anything like him, he doubted he could ever do something as mean as Hermione was suggesting to someone unless they really deserved it.

Still, he couldn’t help but feel hurt by Hermione’s reaction to him. That made two best friends down on his count. Great, just bloody lovely, Harry thought dryly, sitting down on the seat opposite Hermione. It would have been wonderful to have Hermione’s help on trying to get me home. Both her brains and familiar presence would have made things easier.

From the looks of things, he’d have to start from the bottom to repair whatever damage there was to his relationship with Ron and Hermione. He needed to get the two people he trusted the most to help him.

It was funny; when they had told him that they were going to help him find the Horcruxes, Harry hadn't wanted them to go at all in fear for their safety; yet now, when he didn't have their support, he found himself seeking the friendship that had kept him grounded and sane through everything that had happened to him these past six years.

Better start at square one, then.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said.

"So I've heard. I'm trying to read, Potter."

Harry held in a frustrated groan. Merlin, he didn't even know what he did to deserve all this hostility. The situation was really starting to piss him off –his friends, minus Ginny, hated him, there was hardly any information on anything useful, and going home didn't seem like a very probable option at the moment, considering he still didn't know where the bloody hell he was!

He bit his lip, knowing it'd be far too suspicious if he asked Hermione what exactly he'd done –being the brilliant witch that she was, she'd probably figure out something was wrong in the first five seconds, and Harry couldn't afford her finding out if she wasn't his friend, someone he could trust with the secret.

Instead, Harry slumped lower in his seat, brooding.

A few minutes later, a girl slid the compartment doors open. She didn't even have to say anything; Hermione seemed to know exactly what was happening, because she closed her thick book, got up, and trailed behind the girl. Harry quickly followed her lead, determined to try and use this position to his advantage. After all, the Head Boy ought to be privy to information that the student body wasn't, right?

Oh well, at least he'd actually be doing something –plus, the Head Boy and Girl have to do a lot of things together, right? Set schedules and all that? Maybe he could slowly gain Hermione back as a friend, or at least try to coax some information out of her about Harry's standing in Hogwarts. Find out who he can trust, what was going on, etc.

Harry grinned, realizing that one positive aspect of all this was that he was no longer a celebrity, the famous Boy-Who-Lived.

The corners of his mouth suddenly fell, realizing that it was now Neville –shy, self-conscious, unconfident Neville– who bore that title. Harry made a note in the back of his mind to seek him out. Out of everyone, out of all the friends and teachers Harry wanted to talk to, Neville was at the top of his list, a necessity, considering that he was technically in Harry's shoes. He remembered with a tinge of nostalgia the adventures he, Ron, and Hermione had experienced throughout their years together.

But knowing Neville, did he even have friends to help carry him through everything?

"Potter, will you pay attention?" Hermione's exasperated voice broke him out of his reverie.

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Sorry," he added after seeing Hermione glare at him. It didn't have much of an effect; he'd already been subjected to it on various occasions for the past six years.

Several of the younger prefects sniggered at seeing the Head Boy get snapped at by the Head Girl.

"We were talking about the passwords," Hermione explained, not bothering to hide her irritation.

"Er –okay then; what are they?"

Hermione didn't even have to glance at the prompt she'd been given. "'Wronski Feint' for Gryffindor, 'Abracadabra' for Ravenclaw, 'Hippogriff' for Hufflepuff, and 'Pure' for Slytherin. Got it?"

Harry nodded, making sure that he paid more attention as the meeting went on. But really, as time progressed, Harry couldn't see any reason for his momentary jealousy fifth year when Ron had

received the Prefect badge instead of him. It was tedious work –it took much of Harry’s will and respect to his world’s Hermione to keep him from nodding off, especially since he had more important things he could be doing.

Finally, it was over. Thank Merlin, Harry thought silently, allowing himself a sigh of relief. Hermione motioned for Harry to follow her back to the Head compartment, where they started drawing up schedules for the corridor patrols. Harry decided immediately that this was nothing more than distracting busywork . . . however, it did give him an opportunity to try and become friends with Hermione again.

“So . . . how was your summer?” Harry asked, recognizing how lame it had sounded as he gave Pansy Parkinson double Astronomy tower patrol.

Hermione didn’t even look up. “It was fine.”

“How was yours?” she added after a long pause of consideration.

“Eventful,” he said vaguely. “Did you go to France again?” Harry winced inwardly when he realized his mistake.

“Yes, actually –how’d you know that?” Hermione asked suspiciously, eyes narrowed.

“Heard it around,” Harry answered, waving his hand dismissively.

Hermione pursed her lips, but let it go. “Did you hear about the Diagon Alley attack?”

Grimacing at the memory of Padma’s glazed eyes, Harry nodded. “I was there.” Pleased as he was that Hermione was responding to Harry’s attempts, he’d rather not think about what had occurred that day.

But Hermione’s curiosity was peaked. “You were there? Are you okay?” There was an edge of concern in her tone that broke the frost that had previously occupied it.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, my sister and I had to fight them." My sister and I . . . he was really starting to get attached, wasn't he?

"You –you fought the Death Eaters?" Hermione asked incredulously, reluctant respect creeping into her eyes.

Once again, Harry nodded, though his thoughts were on Parvati's bleeding body, Malfoy's shaking hands. If only that git had given them some information! Then, at least Padma wouldn't have died for nothing.

"We should probably finish the schedule," Harry muttered, not meeting Hermione's eyes. To help quench his thirst for vindication, Harry added a third Astronomy tower patrol to Pansy's schedule.

"Hang on," Hermione snapped, snatching the quill out of Harry's hands, "You don't get to suddenly decide to start a reconciliation and leave it like that. I think I deserve to know. I've been trying to read up on what happened, but the Daily Prophet hardly even mentioned it!"

Harry snorted. Since when did the Daily Prophet ever properly report things solely based on truth? Load of bull, most of it was, as swayable as a branch in the wind. Though he would rather not feel the guilty churn in his stomach for not reaching Padma earlier, Harry knew that this, perhaps, would help Hermione trust him, or at the very least help her not hold him in such contempt.

"You know the Patil twins?" Harry asked, keeping his voice even.

Hermione nodded. At this, Harry continued monotonously, "Padma died, and Parvati was badly hurt from a nasty spell; she's okay now, I think she's coming back to Hogwarts. We found them and brought them to the Aurors."

The compartment was completely silent, save for the rumbling of contact between the Express and its train tracks.

"Merlin," Hermione whispered finally. "Why?"

Harry shrugged. “Dunno. We know that Voldemort –don’t flinch– had a reason for being there, but nobody knows why.”

Hermione’s eyes were wide as she regarded Harry. “How can you be so calm?!” she demanded, a faint accusation in her voice.

Detecting her tone, Harry clenched his fists together in boiling anger. Hermione or no Hermione, she had no right to judge him, to assume that watching his classmate bleeding to death in front of him had meant nothing – he raised his eyes to meet Hermione’s, who winced at the blazing anger in Harry’s eyes.

“Shut up,” Harry said coldly, truly recognizing for the first time that this was a stranger in front of him. Hermione would never be so insensitive, so ignorant. “You weren’t there, you didn’t fight for your life, for Parvati and Violet’s life– you didn’t have to bring Padma’s body back. So shut up, just –” Desperately grabbing on to what was left of his self restraint, Harry left, sliding the compartment door shut with a furious slam.

Hermione was left with wide eyes, staring at the compartment door with eyebrows furrowed, a cold realization gripping her. She really didn’t know. For the first time, Hermione Granger realized just how much her books had failed her. There was no volume thick enough to teach empathy.

Meanwhile, Harry Potter was storming his way through the hallway, not registering the numerous greetings that were directed his way. His head was starting to hurt from constantly swerving his neck around to inspect the interior of each compartment, checking for Ginny. Finally, he spotted two redheads and flung the door open, sitting down next to a grinning Ginny.

“Trunk?” Violet asked.

“What?” Harry said distractedly, the aftereffects of his little outburst lingering.

“Your trunk,” Violet repeated slowly, as if speaking to a toddler. “Where is it?”

Harry thought, then groaned before cursing loudly. He'd forgotten it in the Head compartment. Great, now he'll have to go face Fake-Hermione again. Well, Harry thought after a second's musing, I'll have to see her the whole year. A scowl disfigured his face as he realized just how much he missed his Ron and Hermione. He supposed he could manage all this on his own – it's just that it would've been easier with them, though if this Ginny was the same as his, she could be of some help.

But Violet he would never tell; how were you supposed to explain his situation to someone who doesn't exist?

Harry shrugged this question off, cooling down his anger in the process. He wasn't sure exactly why Hermione had set him off like that; maybe he just wasn't used to her being so . . . insensitive. She had always told Ron off for his lack of tact, but obviously this False-Hermione had never actually had real life experience.

"Why does Hermione Granger hate me?" he asked suddenly.

"She's still angry about that?" Dean Thomas asked incredulously. Harry blinked in surprise; he hadn't even registered his presence. Scanning the rest of the compartment, he recognized Demelza, Seamus, Parvati –who was looking blankly out the window, not even acknowledging Harry's rather noisy arrival– and a couple of Gryffindors that Harry knew were a year younger than him, though he only recognized them by face, not name.

"You talking about last year?" Ginny asked, eyebrows furrowed. "But that wasn't even your fault!"

"Er –yeah. Remind me what happened again." Harry asked, carefully making sure that he didn't sound too ignorant.

Violet narrowed her eyes at Harry. "How could you have forgotten?" she asked suspiciously.

"Ran into the Head compartment door –can't really think properly right now," Harry joked, grinning to throw Violet off.

However, though the suspicion dimmed in her eyes somewhat, she still looked wary, and Harry began to feel concerned. Violet had been the first to see Harry when he initially arrived here –wherever “here” was– and though she’s acted completely normal around him and never mentioned it again, he couldn’t help but feel as if she was the one he needed to be the most careful around. He felt that, somehow, she suspected that Harry was not exactly the brother that she knew. But then, that could have just been Harry’s paranoia getting to him.

At least, he hoped so.

“Well, you’ve always been really forgetful –I remember that time when you forgot to pack your wand before coming to Hogwarts,” Violet said breezily, her voice completely casual now. “Anyway, Hermione thinks you played a prank on her. Someone else did it and landed the blame on you –we don’t know who it was, though.

“It wasn’t me!” she said indignantly at Harry’s expression. “You remember that Muggle dream where you walk into school naked? Well, that’s what happened to her, though whoever did it put some kind of charm on her so she would think she was fully clothed when she, er, wasn’t. And being the conservative, stiff, bookish type of person she is, that was the one thing in the world that, well...you can imagine how horrible it’d be for her, for anybody, really.”

“Oh,” was really all Harry could say to that. “Why’d she think it was me?”

“Someone left a note saying it was you who did it,” Dean filled in.

Harry frowned. “Hermione’s smart enough to know whoever did that wouldn’t be stupid enough to tell her who did it!”

Dean shrugged. “She needed someone to blame, and you were the closest thing. You know, I still can’t believe you need us to tell you about it again –didn’t you say your ears were ringing for a week after that row with her, when she was screaming at you in the middle of the common room?”

“Right, but I just needed another perspective,” Harry said lamely. He really needed to work on his lying skills.

One of the sixth years rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

Ginny made a sudden movement. “Oh, I almost forgot! Your present, Harry.” She brought out box covered in wrapping paper decorated with flying snitches.

Smiling, he thanked her, feeling strange surrounded by these people –some he knew, and quite well, but they weren’t the same as Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna –Ginny’s presence was the only thing that made this feel even remotely right. And even then...Harry caught Ginny’s eyes, noting with surprise that they were different, more innocent.

That’s when he realized it. This Ginny had never been kidnapped and left to die in the Chamber of Secrets; she had never been manipulated and betrayed by someone she thought had been a friend. So who was? Had the Chamber of Secrets even opened here?

Ah, the mystery and danger of Hogwarts’ dark corners; though he knew he loved every niche of that castle. Somehow, he felt that things would get better now that he was heading home.

“Open it later,” Ginny said when Harry didn’t immediately do anything with it.

“Okay,” he said, carefully tucking the present into his coat pocket.

“Anyone watch the football championship?” Dean asked, breaking the moment between Ginny and Harry, a sly smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “West Ham completely –”

“No one knows who the bloody team is, Dean!” Seamus interrupted, sounding absolutely exasperated. Harry had to smile too, remembering Dean’s poster in their dorm. “But Ireland’s been flying really well –not surprising, since they won the World Cup before –”

“And haven’t since,” Demelza retorted. “Won’t again, neither.”

“Want to take me up on that?” Seamus asked eagerly, a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Don’t think your mum would be too happy bout you gambling,” Harry added before he could stop himself. He remembered all too clearly the hostility he’d had to endure because Seamus’s mother had thought Harry and Dumbledore lying loons.

But instead of the hardened glare Harry had received fifth year, Seamus merely smirked cheekily at him. “Me mum’s not gonna find out, is she?”

“Speaking of, where’s Ron?” Dean asked, looking around as if expecting Ron to just pop out of nowhere. “I thought he was going to meet us.”

Ginny glanced at Harry surreptitiously. “Er –I think he wanted to go have a good snog with Lavender Brown.”

Demelza rolled her eyes. “Typical Ron; you’d wonder how he saved all those goals, his head constantly in the clouds.” She turned to Harry. “Oh, I was watching Bulgaria play, and their seeker –Viktor Krum– did this amazing move that’s real famous now. Called the ‘Krum’ I think.”

“How original,” Violet commented dryly. “Let’s try it!”

“Can’t, Vi –it’s not a chaser move.”

Violet raised her eyebrow. “Guess it’s yours, then Harry.”

Harry nodded absently, wondering about this new information about Ron. Was he good friends with Harry? Probably not, since he seemed to have tolerated Harry snogging his sister before. Presumably he hung out with Seamus and Dean if they were expecting him; but maybe it was more of the Quidditch crowd, not just a small group of friends. The Golden Trio, Harry thought, amused. Friends, but not as close as Ron, Hermione, and Harry had been.

Then it clicked that Ron was still dating Lavender.

Won-Won, Harry thought, a grin erupting on his face. He couldn't believe the Ron here would actually put up with that for more than a year. After all, just having to watch the mushiness was revolting enough for Harry, and especially so for Hermione.

Harry's grin slipped as he realized that not only was he on bad terms with his best mates, but that the two –who obviously liked each other in an entirely un-platonic way– probably weren't even on speaking terms.

Suddenly, Harry sensed a disturbance; something about the light-hearted atmosphere of the compartment changed. Turning his head slightly, he saw that Parvati had stood up, her eyes flashing, cheeks flushed with anger.

"How –how can you –" she stuttered, voice shaking tremendously.

"Parvati?" Dean said cautiously. "What's wrong?"

Violet was looking at Harry worriedly, and he understood; they both knew exactly what was wrong.

"How can you talk about Viktor bloody Krum when people are dying!" she shrieked, tears glistening in her eyes. "When people are being tortured, all you can talk about is your fucking Quidditch? You...you...she's dead!" Her voice was rising higher and higher as her breathing became erratic in hysteria. "She's dead, she's dead, she's dead, Padma's dead –that's more important than Quidditch!"

Parvati couldn't even talk anymore at this point; she was sobbing hard, hot tears staining her dark cheeks.

Everyone was frozen in a stunned silence. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Violet stood up and approached the crying girl cautiously. "We're sorry, Parvati," she said quietly, "we didn't think you wanted to talk about –"

Parvati let out a shrill, devastating scream as she pushed past Violet and rushed out of the compartment, promptly smashing into the Head Girl.

“Parvati!” Hermione exclaimed. “What’s wro –”

Harry knew that Parvati was having a massive breakdown, that she was reaching for her wand to hex Hermione –quickly, Harry grabbed Parvati’s shoulders and shoved her outside the compartment, Hermione quickly leaping aside for them. Harry decisively shut the sliding door before facing Parvati, whose eyes were suddenly wide open, pure, primal fear written all over her face.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Harry said gently, realizing that Parvati must be remembering what had happened in Diagon Alley. “But I couldn’t let you hex Hermione, you understand that, right?”

Slowly, Parvati nodded her head, the panic in her eyes diminishing slightly.

Harry remembered the Yule Ball, how Parvati had been showing him off a bit, bragging about how she’d gotten the famous Harry Potter as a date. Now, however –now she just looked vulnerable and helpless, unable to deal with the fact that her twin, her other half, was gone forever.

“Sorry,” Parvati muttered, silent tears still flowing down her cheeks. “Didn’t mean to lose control like that.”

“It’s alright,” Harry said. “They weren’t trying to ignore Padma, you know.” He ignored Parvati’s flinch at the mention of her twin. “It’s easier to talk about small, normal stuff than...well, you know.”

He paused, recollecting. “They know. They understand; they weren’t going to mention her until you did.”

Parvati nodded jerkily. “I almost didn’t come back –to Hogwarts, I mean,” she said quietly. “My mum didn’t want me too, but if I had stayed at home –Padma was everywhere.”

Harry nodded, listening silently. He knew exactly how she felt; it had been the same for him regarding Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. Sirius had hated it, and Harry hated it too. There were too many reminders of Sirius, of everything that his godfather had despised and tried to run away from, only to be trapped there in his last days.

“I –I think I’ll apologize to everyone,” Parvati said, looking ashamed about her outburst.

“Don’t think you need do,” Harry answered, though she probably would anyway.

“Er –Potter?”

Harry turned towards Hermione, forgetting that she had been there the entire time. “Yeah?” he said somewhat frostily.

“Can I have a word in the Heads compartment?”

Harry nodded and had starting walking with her when Parvati’s voice called him back.

“Harry? Thanks. For Diagon Alley and everything. I’d be dead if it weren’t for you,” she said quietly, though her eyes showed her immense gratitude.

Giving her a small smile, he added, “Violet helped too.”

“Okay,” she said before re-entering the compartment.

Harry then turned his attention towards Hermione. “Lead the way.”

They made their way to the Heads compartment in silence; even the sound of Harry gently sliding the door shut seemed deafening.

Crossing his arms, Harry spoke first. “What d’you want?” He wasn’t exactly sure why he was being so frosty towards her –after all, he was supposed to be trying to repair their friendship– but it was probably because the differences still unnerved him immensely.

Sure enough, Hermione flinched at the iciness in his tone. She looked torn, as if what she was about to do was hard enough as it is. "I'm sorry," she blurted out suddenly. "About yelling earlier. I didn't –" Hermione looked away, but Harry was surprised. Did she just apologize? If anything, he would have thought his current attitude towards her would have just set her off more.

He really did not understand girls, not at all.

"Er –thanks." He said uncomfortably. "I'm sorry too, I guess. Listen, about the whole thing that you hate me for...I didn't do that."

Hermione blushed furiously. "I think I always knew that," she said slowly. "Just needed to take it out on someone, I guess. Rather silly of me, isn't it? I mean, you've always been perfectly nice to me, even when others aren't..." She trailed off, more embarrassed than ever, and maybe even feeling a little pathetic.

She must not have very many friends, Harry realized, if she had never become friends with us, and everyone just thought of her as the bossy know-it-all and nothing else.

"Well, I forgive you. We okay, then?" he asked, offering his hand out to her.

Hermione stared at his outstretched hand for a moment, then hesitantly shook it, a slight smile dancing on her lips. "Yeah," she said in a strange voice. "I guess we are."

Harry grinned, feeling that –finally –he had made some progress here. Maybe hope wasn't lost after all. "Wanna finish those schedules now?"

She nodded, retrieving Harry's pile, minus half its original size, and handed them to him. "You know, you put Pansy Parkinson on Astronomy tower patrol three times."

Smirking, he replied, "I know."

Hermione frowned, looking disapproving for a moment before shrugging it off. Harry figured that Pansy had probably picked on her enough to waive her disapproval aside in favor of the mental image of Pansy huffing and puffing as she was forced to climb the stairs.

Then, slowly but surely, Hermione began to laugh. It was hesitant, like she rarely got the chance to really laugh, to really smile and whole heartedly enjoy the benefits of friendship.

Harry was surprised as tears of mirth flowed down her cheeks, unable to contain her laughter. His head hurt trying to figure out why she was laughing this hard. The thought of Pansy's upcoming patrol was amusing, but not that funny.

He didn't think he'd ever understand the inner workings of girls.

The Sorting Hat ended its song with a decisive snap of its mouth, regressing into silence amidst the usual applause.

To Harry's surprise, the line of first years was preceded by none other than Nymphadora Tonks, whose pink spikes contrasted heavily with the rather pale, nervous looking eleven-year-olds. Despite himself, Harry felt a grin tug at his lips.

"Who's that?" Hermione asked.

"Nymphadora Tonks. She's an Auror, but I'm not sure why she's leading the first years," Harry replied, frowning.

Much to his friends' shock, Harry had waved Hermione over to sit next to them as they entered the Great Hall. He couldn't help but remember how stricken and torn she had looked, as if wondering if Harry was playing a joke or not. It had seemed to take a lot of courage to accept the invitation, surrounded by people who have probably ridiculed her every year of her Hogwarts career.

Gaining Hermione's friendship had been easy enough once they got over the initial hump, but Harry knew that Ron would be much harder. However, seeing Tonks –cheerful and effervescent as ever– lifted his spirits.

Tonks named off the various people, although it did not escape Harry's notice that the amount of brand new students had decreased significantly. Finally, after all had been properly sorted, the chair at the head of the faculty table screeched as it was pushed backwards.

A stern looking Headmistress McGonagall suddenly stood up, gazing solemnly out at the Great Hall, whose numbers had dwindled considerably. Harry had half expected Dumbledore's vibrant energy to make up for the empty spaces in the House tables; his loss became even more painfully pronounced when compared to McGonagall's disciplinarian air.

"Welcome to another year of Hogwarts; I congratulate those of you who decided to come back this year, despite the dark times our world is going through. Remember that education is important for post war, when all of this is over with. When the battle ends, we need young witches and wizards with refined minds and magical ability to carry our generation through the rebuilding. Therefore, I urge you to focus on your studies like never before –I guarantee you'll need them." A small smile tugged at McGonagall's lips. "Although I daresay you'll find some brand of fun to balance things out."

She then went over the basic rules, stressing especially on not leaving the grounds without permission and limiting nighttime wanderings for security reasons. McGonagall also said that any suspicious activity by a teacher, faculty member, or even a fellow student was to be reported to her immediately. Harry figured they couldn't risk anything like Malfoy's plan to happen again.

"Eat up," Professor McGonagall concluded seriously as food appeared on gold plates on cue.

Everyone immediately dug in, but Harry turned to Hermione. "Isn't the speech usually after dinner?"

Hermione, who had been adding pork chops to her plate, looked up. "Yes, but that was with Professor Dumbledore, wasn't it? I suppose McGonagall just wanted to do things differently.

Harry frowned, but didn't say anything more on the subject. However, when he looked back up at the faculty table, Professor McGonagall had disappeared.

Must be Order business, Harry mused, suddenly seized with a desire to figure out what was going on. He could get Ron and Hermione together under the invisibility cloak and find McGonagall with the Marauder's Map –

Except he didn't have the Map or the cloak, and they weren't exactly best friends anymore, where they?

"Merlin, Harry, eat already! Mum'll kill you if you go anorexic," Violet teased from across Harry.

Harry scowled good naturedly, already slipping into the familiar comforts of Hogwarts against his will. Suddenly, he felt something brush against his leg. Looking over, he found Ginny smirking impishly at him as she interlocked their feet briefly, swinging them under the table.

"Ow!" Dean yelled loudly as their combined feet accidentally knocked into his knee. Violet laughed, and even Parvati had a small smile on her lips, though it did not reach her eyes.

Chuckling lightly, Harry dug into the delicious Hogwarts food, glad to be back at his true home, where his thirst for information would surely be quenched.

Harry allowed a groan of frustration to escape his lips as he scanned yellowed editions of the Daily Prophet, only to mentally kick himself in the arse when he realized how dangerous being noisy was. After all, he hadn't seen his invisibility cloak in this world, and it'd be too suspicious if he suddenly went up to Dad and asked about it.

So here he was, noxing his light at every creak and squeak. He supposed he would have to just go to the library during the day – surely no one would look in too closely on what he was researching?

He felt completely blind without his invisibility cloak and Marauder's Map...hang on; Fred and George were going to hand it down to Ron, weren't they? If they hadn't given it to Harry?

Scowling, Harry pushed away thoughts of his difficult best friend out of his mind. With Hermione, it had been fairly easy enough to start the beginning of a friendship, but he suspected it was because she hadn't had very many friends to begin with. It made Harry sad to think of Hermione, alone for seven years save for her books.

Suddenly, something caught his eye.

Husband and Wife Aurors Attacked at Home

Eyes hungrily soaking up the information –which he already knew– Harry realized that there had been something that Violet had not told him; perhaps she didn't know either.

At first the Aurors found no trace of Harry Potter, the young son of the couple, and for a while he was believed to have been taken captive by the Death Eaters. Although the suspected Death Eaters were apprehended by Aurors, the Potters had been incapacitated at the time, therefore unable to reveal the whereabouts of their son. He was later found hidden in their bedroom closet, the scene of the crime. Healers have confirmed that the young Potter is unresponsive due to shock; they believe that he may have witnessed the brutal torture through the slits in the door. They are now considering performing an extensive Memory Charm on him in order to wipe the memory away; this is an extremely controversial procedure, for it could cause permanent loss of short or long term memory.

Harry put the newspaper down, not wanting to read more. Did Neville see his parents tortured? Harry wondered, horrified. Is that why he's always forgetting the password? I always thought...

Obviously this Harry had a better memory than Harry's Neville if he's got good enough grades to make Head Boy and remember Quidditch strategy.

Shaking his head, Harry carefully placed the edition back into its proper place, yawning; it was getting late. Much as he'd like to keep on reading, it probably wouldn't be good if he fell asleep in class.

Deciding that he'd tackled enough for today, Harry dimmed his light, carefully checking around the corner before proceeding his way cautiously out of the library and back to the Gryffindor common room, knowing the Fat Lady wouldn't tell on him for coming back late.

However, what Harry didn't realize was that someone watched him leave from behind a stack of dusty tomes.

“Potter, I’m not going to do your Potions essay for you,” Hermione said, positively exasperated.

Harry looked at her pleadingly. “I don’t want you to do it for me . . . just fix it up a bit.”

“That’s cheating, Potter,” Hermione retorted stiffly, looking uncomfortable at the thought of breaking the rules.

“That’s editing, Granger,” Harry mimicked, grinning widely. He missed bickering with his friends.

It bothered Harry that Hermione still wasn’t comfortable with calling him by his first name. A couple of weeks into the school year and she still called him “Potter”. He couldn’t help but get the feeling that she was purposely keeping him at a distance, almost as if she thought that when she did call him “Harry”, she’ll have to go back to calling him by his surname eventually.

In other words, Hermione still didn’t entirely trust the sincerity of their friendship.

“Harry!”

He turned his head around to see Violet walking towards him. Without invitation, she plopped herself onto the couch and flashed a smile at Hermione. “Hey, Granger,” she said easily, her voice friendly.

“Hello, Potter,” Hermione said, a twinge of surprise in her voice.

“Call me Violet,” the redhead said, “Wouldn’t know who you’re talking to if both of us are here, right?”

“I suppose,” Hermione answered, blinking at Violet’s outgoing manner.

Violet turned towards Harry, suddenly scowling. “Did you forget?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Forget what?”

Sighing in exasperation, Violet mimed wringing her brother's neck. "Quidditch tryouts, you moronic Captain. When –are –they?"

"Oh," Harry said. He'd completely forgotten about Quidditch in light of everything that has been happening.

"Oh?" Violet mimicked, clearly ruffled about this. "You forgot to set tryouts, and all you can say is 'Oh'? D'you realize how much we need Quidditch now, with half the school gone? Need a little friendly competition to keep people from killing each other in the hallways."

Harry grimaced, remembering that massive hex-fest the day before. The target was a Slytherin boy whose father was suspected to be a Death Eater, one who supposedly murdered Hannah Abbott's mother. Harry remembered Hannah leaving school after finding this out the previous year, but it looked like she had decided to come back – perhaps seeing that boy had made her want to seek revenge.

However, what began as a personal matter soon involved all the houses as Slytherins came to the boy's rescue, sending curses at Hannah, who the other three houses chose to help. All and all, there were a lot of tentacles and tap dancers when the dust cleared. A few were badly hurt –in particular, Hannah and the Slytherin boy –but it could have been worse.

"You're right," Harry said, "I'll talk to McGonagall in Transfiguration."

"Actually, you should talk to Professor Tonks," Hermione piped up helpfully, "She's Head of House now."

"Okay, thanks," Harry said, smiling at her. Tonks hated being called "Professor." First day of class, she'd insisted that they just call her simply "Tonks" because "Professor Tonks" made her feel old.

Like Tonks could ever be old; the pink hair would see to that.

Glancing across the room, Harry noticed Ron hunched over a desk, pen twirling between his fingers as he scrunched his features together in concentration. Must be harder to get by without Hermione's "editing", Harry thought wryly. Briefly, he flirted with the

idea of going over and boxing Ron in the ears for being an insufferable prat, but decided that it wouldn't help him any. If he didn't approve of Harry going out with Ginny, then beating him in a fist fight would only make things worse.

Ron has been giving Harry an extraordinarily hard time –more so than he had for Ginny's past boyfriends; Harry should know, he was the one Ron had complained to. Perhaps it was because Ginny was much more serious about Harry than she was for Dean or Michael, who could be considered to be brief, experimental flings.

In fact, he still remembered vividly the confrontation the second day of school; his jaw still throbbed.

"Harry, is everything okay?"

Snapping out of his daydreams, Harry returned Ginny's gaze. "Yeah, fine," he said distantly. Once again he felt the flirtatious butterflies he had become accustomed to last year whenever he looked at Ginny. There was an immense urge to just snog her, to see if her kisses were the same . . . but contrary to popular belief, Harry Potter does possess some self-restraint.

So instead, he settled for holding her hand, savoring the warmth of her deceptively little palms. They walked down the hallway in comfortable silence, listening to the bustle of the students surrounding them, although it was quieter and less chaotic than it had been less than a year ago.

"You're different," Ginny commented, her brown eyes serious.

"So are you," Harry said, realizing that there were indeed subtle differences, though she still remained, essentially, his Ginny.

Ginny shook her head. "No, but you're . . . I dunno . . . it has something to do with the Diagon Alley attack, doesn't it?"

Harry blinked, surprised. Wasn't she good friends with Violet? "Didn't my sister tell you?"

There he goes with “my sister” again.

Shaking her head, Ginny replied, “No, but you know her . . . she keeps things to herself sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Harry said distantly, unconsciously rubbing her hand with his thumb.

“OY!”

Both of them turned around, cringing at the familiar voice.

Ron Weasley, feet thundering down the hallway, screeched to a stop in front of them, staring at their intertwined hands in horror. Pointing accusingly at Harry, he said, “I told you to stay away from my sister!”

Harry valiantly resisted the strong urge to roll his eyes.

“Who I date is not for you to decide,” Ginny said hotly, stepping in front of Harry.

“If I decided, you wouldn’t be dating at all!” Ron exclaimed.

“Good thing you don’t decide, then. And you’d better watch it; Harry’s team captain.”

Eyes wide, Ron looked up at Harry. “You’d kick me off the team just cause –see, Ginny, this is exactly why you shouldn’t date! Never know who could turn out to be a git!”

“Bit hypocritical there, aren’t you?” Harry muttered, remembering vividly the almost sickening snog sessions between Ron and Lavender.

Ron stared back and forth between them, looking flustered. He looked torn between scorning his sister and yelling at Harry; he decided on the latter.

“You have no right to date my sister!” he shouted, pointing a determined finger at Harry, “I’ve seen you –snogging in broad

daylight! You're too old for her, and –and –I won't let you take advantage of her!"

Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously as he felt anger pulsing through his veins. Before he knew it, his temper had got the better of him at Ron's infuriatingly exaggerated protectiveness and unfounded accusation.

"I'm taking advantage of Ginny?" he repeated incredulously, "Funny of you to say, innit? Or haven't you noticed yourself eating Lavender's face out in order to make Hermione jealous, eh, ickle Won-Won?"

That's when Ron's fist connected with Harry's jaw.

Well, perhaps Harry shouldn't have lost his temper, but mind you, he did have good reason. Why were both his best friends so different here? People couldn't possibly change this much, could they?

Apparently they could. Ron, sensing that someone was watching him, caught Harry's gaze and glared fiercely. However, to Ron's surprise, Harry didn't glare back, merely cocking an eyebrow and turning back to Violet.

"Think he'll try out for Quidditch?" Violet asked, watching the exchange with interest.

Harry shrugged. "Hopefully. Need a good keeper."

Violet nodded. "Shame he's so protective of Ginny; it really annoys her, especially the double standard."

"I'll bet," Harry said, grinning slightly.

However, his grin slipped into a frown as he sensed something weird, something he couldn't quite explain. But seeing the person climbing from the portrait hole cleared all questions of that feeling away.

Neville, Harry thought, surprised. This place's Boy-Who-Lived had been a no show at classes for the past two weeks, making Harry think he'd started on the Horcrux quest –so why was he here?

Both Hermione and Violet noticed Harry's attention suddenly on Neville. "I read in the Daily Prophet that he's been busy helping them on a 'confidential matter'. But I dunno –"

She was interrupted by Violet's rude snort. "Confidential matter, my arse," she scoffed, "They have him running around like a dog on a leash –their bloody poster boy. People aren't very happy with the Ministry at the moment; they need Nev to clean up their own sodding messes."

Harry frowned, surprised at this reaction. Judging from the photo he had found in Violet's room, she and Neville were pretty good friends. But then he remembered her use of "Nev", apparently a nickname she has for him. Had Neville began distancing from her as Harry had planned to from Hermione and Ron?

Judging by the slightly worried look on Violet's face, he had thought right.

"I'll er . . . be right back," she excused herself as traced Neville's steps up to the boy's dormitory.

"What was that all about, do you suppose?" Hermione asked, staring curiously at Violet's retreating back. When Harry turned to look at her, he noticed a disapproving frown on his bushy haired friend's face. "Not very appropriate to chase after him to the boy's dormitory, don't you think?"

Harry stared at her incredulously for a moment before groaning loudly. "Get your head out of the gutter Hermione!" he said, irked for some reason about the thought of his sister being "inappropriate" . . . oh Merlin, he was starting to sound like Ron wasn't he?

Hermione blushed furiously. "My head is not in 'the gutter'!" she protested, "And –I'm not saying . . ."

Smiling involuntarily at the flustered expression on Hermione's face, Harry got up. "Well, then, as Head Boy and Girl, we'll have to check if

they are being inappropriate in any way, won't we?" he said lightly, offering a hand to help Hermione up.

If Neville is doing anything remotely improper. . . Harry thought savagely, but then stopped himself, horrified. Guess Ron was more of an influence on him than was good for him.

But he also wanted to get a chance to talk to Neville, who was not only a friend he hadn't seen yet, but possibly a key player in figuring out where Harry was. If anybody had the information that would let Harry know what was different and what was the same, it was Neville.

Hermione's hand suddenly gripped his arm in warning.

"What is it?" he said, but Hermione raised a finger to her lips, which Harry understood to be "Shut the bloody hell up".

"D'you hear that?" she whispered, inching closer to the seventh year boy's dormitory.

Frowning, Harry strained his ears, and also heard muffled shouting from the other side of the door. However, the shouting seemed to amplify in volume with every inch closer to the door. At any other time Harry would have heartily wished for some Extendable Ears, but he felt that in this case, they wouldn't be needed.

"Can't believe . . . thought . . . better sense than that!"

"Bloody hell, Violet, your own parents work for the Ministry!"

Harry recognized the new voice instantly as Neville's, though he didn't think he'd ever heard Neville sound so hostile . . . or swear, for that matter. He noticed Hermione, too, listening in on the conversation with great interest, all thoughts of eavesdropping being against the rules forgotten.

"But they aren't the Ministry's sodding lap dogs, are they?"

There was a pause.

"Is that what you think of me?" Neville's voice was dangerously quiet.

"Yeah that's what I think of you," Violet responded firmly, her voice equally subdued.

Harry and Hermione listened intently, waiting for one of them to speak up; Neville did a few eerily silent beats later.

"Anything else you wanna throw at me?" he asked, "I know I never returned your owls, but Merlin . . . you don't have to overreact so much."

"Me, OVEREACTING?" Violet screamed, furious venom laced in every syllable. "I think I'm entitled to overacting when my friend's becoming one of them!"

"One of who, exactly?" Neville asked, restraint clear in his voice.

"One of those bloody bigots, the idiots who refused to listen to you and Dumbledore and had the nerve to come crawling back to you to fix their messes! I can't believe you're actually getting sucked into this! I thought . . . guess the Wizarding World really is doomed now, with you as our savior."

Even with the safety of a wooden door between them, the Heads could feel the buildup of angry magic that was about to explode at any given moment.

"Get out," Neville growled dangerously, "I said, get the bloody hell out!"

Harry and Hermione leaped back as the door swung open and an angry, distressed Violet came out, sparing her brother a seething glance before practically sprinting back down to the Common Room.

Neville stepped out of the door, looking past the Heads for a moment at Violet's rapidly retreating back, looking both furious and upset. Finally, he came out of his daze and noticed his fellow seventh years watching him.

“Hello Harry . . . Granger.” He said stiffly, looking a bit wary of Harry, as if expecting Harry to yell at him right about now.

But he didn’t. “Hey, Nev,” he said, trying out the nickname. Neville didn’t look taken aback, so Harry must be on good terms with him too. “How was your summer?”

Harry could feel Hermione’s questioning gaze on him, but he ignored her. He knew what he was doing.

Neville looked even more wary, and now confused. “Eventful,” he said vaguely, echoing Harry’s response just weeks ago.

“I’ll bet,” Harry said, “Listen, if you need notes to catch up on the classes you miss, you can ask me, alright? Actually, it’d probably be better if you asked Hermione . . . at least you wouldn’t have to use a key to decipher her handwriting.”

Neville managed to crack a small smile at the joke, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Okay, thanks Harry.”

“No problem,” Harry responded, smiling pleasantly.

“Er –I’d better go unpack,” Neville muttered uncomfortably, re-entering the dormitory.

The door shut, leaving Harry and Hermione standing outside in silence.

“D’you honestly think that Longbottom didn’t know that we’d heard everything?” Hermione hissed.

“Of course not; he knows that we know,” Harry said, “But I didn’t have to explode at him over it, did I? It’s the beginning of the year; don’t want to be on bad terms with him already.”

Hermione merely stared.

“You never cease to amaze me, Harry,” Hermione stated, impressed that Harry possessed that much tact.

But Harry merely smiled as he noted that she had called him “Harry.”
“Can anyone tell me the incantation for the Patronus Charm?”

Hermione’s eager hand shot up immediately, and after an inner debate, Harry raised his hand as well, albeit with a bit more control.

“Hermione?” Tonks called.

“The incantation is ‘Expecto Patronum’, Professor,” she stated.

From his seat in the back, Ron sniggered. “She’s like a walking textbook,” he commented none too quietly.

Tonks frowned. “Mr. Weasley, shut up or I’ll give you detention . . . even better –make you walk around with matching pink hair for a month. Very manly, I’d say.”

Flushing furiously, Hermione muttered, “That won’t be necessary, Professor,”

Harry cringed for Hermione’s sake; Ron had made many rude comments like this in the past week. At first, Tonks had merely frowned but was apparently getting tired of Ron’s constant jeering, sticking up for Hermione when no one else did. Harry smiled, remembering that they were on pretty good terms in his world.

Meanwhile, Ron slumped in his chair, muttering what sounded like “not fair . . . only joking . . .”

“Just shut it, Weasley,” Neville snapped sharply. Apparently he was still in a bad mood from his row with Violet earlier that day, during Harry and Hermione’s free period.

Ron seemed taken aback at Neville ganging up against him too, and fell silent, looking sullen. Harry couldn’t help but feel a little vindicated thrill from the same monster that possessed him sixth year, when he began to have feeling for Ginny –he wasn’t sure if it was love, exactly, but it was definitely a hard crush, something that could evolve into something more.

But I can't, Harry reminded himself, I can't put anyone else in danger.

That was the whole reason why he broke up with her at the end of the year, wasn't it? It didn't seem fair; but then, since when was life ever fair?

"Harry, why don't you give it a try?" Tonks said brightly, smiling encouragingly at him.

He froze. It couldn't hurt, could it? His family already knew he could perform a Patronus, and Harry could just pass off his knowledge as coming from a family of Aurors.

Thinking about what it felt like to eat dinner with his family, Harry said easily, "Expecto Patronum!"

Sure enough, the beautiful silver stag erupted from Harry's wand and cantered around the room as surprised gasps rang across the room. However, it did something odd; it pranced towards Tonks, circling around her before approaching Hermione, Neville, and finally, Ron, who looked at it strangely.

Prongs returned to Harry, allowing him to stroke its ghostly back once before fading away.

"And that, class, is a Patronus," Tonks said, a hint of pride in her voice. "Okay, everyone divide up and practice!"

Hermione immediately made a beeline for Harry. "How did you do that?" she demanded, eyes wide, "That's high level magic –I read that some wizards never master it!"

Harry shrugged. "Both my parents are Aurors."

Luckily, Hermione seemed to accept this explanation. Then her expression changed. "Will you teach me?" she asked, almost timidly. She'd probably never had to ask anybody for help on anything –or rather, no one to ask.

“You’re really smart –you’ll probably catch on quick.” Harry said, remembering Hermione’s successful otter Patronus floating over their heads.

But at this, her face fell. “I’ve tried,” she muttered, “It didn’t work.”

“Okay, I’ll help. Er –what was your happy memory?”

Hermione blushed immediately, but her eyes were guarded.

“Can’t help you if you don’t tell me.”

She bit her lip, a habit that Harry’s Hermione never picked up. “My tenth birthday party.” she whispered, her eyes downcast, “Someone showed up.”

Harry couldn’t help but feel an aching sadness for Hermione. Had his Hermione felt this kind of isolation in the Muggle world too?

Before Harry could comment, several others in the class were approaching them.

“Harry, mate, how’d you make that Bambi thing?” Dean asked, ignoring Hermione’s presence as he had for the past couple weeks.

“Bambi?” Harry repeated, raising his eyebrows in amusement.

“What’s a Bambi?” Ron whispered loudly, “A cradle robber?”

It was all Harry could do to keep his temper reigned in and his fist held back from returning the punch Ron had dealt him. That prat; he wasn’t this overprotective in Harry’s world, not even to Dean –at least he’d never punched him.

“Ginny’s a year younger than Harry,” Hermione said, her voice determined even as it quavered, “And she can make her own decisions without a babysitter.”

Ron spun around to turn his attention towards her, looking peeved. "That's funny, coming from you –bet you're not even out of diapers yet."

Hermione flushed again, her eyes were shining suspiciously.

"Leave her alone, Ron!" Parvati snapped, shocked at her friend's behavior.

"You shut up!" Ron roared, losing his temper completely.

"Control yourself, mate!" Seamus and Dean said at the same time, each grabbing an arm and keeping Ron from pouncing on anyone.

"What's going on over here?" Tonks demanded, narrowly avoiding tripping over her feet as she crossed the room, Neville trailing behind her.

"Nothing, Tonks," Harry said quickly. If Ron got detention for this, he'd definitely find a way to link it as being Harry's fault.

Tonks looked suspiciously at Hermione's teary eyes, Harry's neutral expression, and Ron angrily shaking his friends' grips off his arm. However, she let it go. "Get back to your Patronus before I conjure 'dunce' hats for you lot to wear." She said warningly as she led Neville back to where they had been talking before.

"You okay?" Harry asked Hermione awkwardly. He'd never been good with crying girls.

She let out a reluctant sniff. "I'm fine," Hermione replied, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her robes. "Let's just . . . let's just do the Patronus, okay?"

So Harry practiced with Hermione as they tried out various happy memories. The longer they kept on going, the more Hermione's Patronus began to take a more solid shape. But when she did succeed in conjuring a silver otter, Hermione refused to tell him what memory she had used.

Soon enough, the period was over, with only Harry and Hermione conjuring a successful Patronus. But as everyone packed their bags and filed out of class, Tonks called him over to her desk.

"Go on without me," he told his friends as they lingered to wait for him.

Wondering what this was about, Harry approached Tonks's desk tentatively, the fact that Neville was also standing there not escaping his notice. Harry noticed Tonks flicking her wand surreptitiously, casting a non-verbal spell. He figured it must be the silencing charm, but he had his wand at the ready just in case.

Harry suddenly remembered that he was supposed to ask about Quidditch tryouts; but he refrained from asking now. This upcoming conversation looked more important than that –he'll ask later.

"So, Harry," Tonks said, "Neville and I was wondering if you'd be willing to tutor Neville. It wouldn't be too hard –just the Patronous and dueling practice. I'd do it myself, but I've got a lot of stuff I need to do for the Order outside teaching. Your Dad tells me you're an excellent duelist, and you definitely held your own against the Death Eaters in Diagon Alley . . . I think it'd be good for the both of you. How 'bout it?"

Harry glanced up at Neville, who was watching him unflinchingly. He couldn't tell from his expression if Neville actually wanted Harry's tutoring or not –well, he'd been the one who enjoyed the D.A. meetings the most, so maybe . . .

"Okay," Harry said, "I'll do it."

Violet's squeal of joy unceremoniously interrupted Harry as he finished off another sentence, splattering a bit of ink on the table as she embraced her brother enthusiastically.

"You finally did it!" she declared happily.

"What?" Harry asked, confused.

"Quidditch tryouts, you prat. It's about time."

"Oh. Right." Harry said tiredly. He had a Potions essay of Grawp-sized proportions due the next day, not to mention his first "lesson" with Neville in a couple of hours. After being bombarded by various Quidditch hopefuls asking for tips on making the team, Harry was officially exhausted. Not only that, but his increasingly less frequent visits to Hogwarts' Daily Prophet archives haven't been especially fruitful either.

Violet's smile fell as she cocked her head at him quizzically. "You don't look so good,"

"Neither do you," Harry retorted. It was true; despite her excited girly squeals before, her eyes carried subtle dark bags beneath them, and there was a slight clumsiness in the way she stood.

But Violet merely stuck her tongue out at him. "Girls only like you because you play Quidditch –athletic magnetism and all. Don't look very macho to me," she teased, pinching Harry's bony arm to emphasize her point.

Harry scowled playfully. "What a blow to my masculinity."

Violet smirked. "Indeed." She glanced over at Harry's half finished essay. "Egh, name and explain all the natural elements involved in a Dreamless Sleep Potion? Good luck with that." Violet peered closer. "Actually, mandrake root has nothing to do with it; jasmine's more like it."

"How d'you know that?" Harry asked suspiciously, remembering his discovery of Violet's unhealthy habit of taking Dreamless Sleep Potions just a month ago.

"I'm good at Potions," Violet said breezily, refusing to acknowledge Harry's narrowed eyes. "That essay shouldn't take you that long; but then, Potions has never been your strong point, has it? Got a date with Ginny after or something? That why you're rushing?"

"Actually," Harry said, recognizing the sudden strain in their conversation, "I'm tutoring Neville soon, so I'll have to hurry up to make it on time, won't I?"

Violet froze, hazel eyes angry as she remembered her row with Neville two days ago.

"Why would you be tutoring him?" she asked coldly.

"Tonks asked me to," Harry responded with a shrug, "So—"

"So he'll have the necessary skills to run around as the Ministry's pet monkey?"

"No," Harry said, becoming increasingly frustrated with his sister's attitude. "So he'll have the necessary skills for the Final Battle, for finding the Hor—" Harry stopped abruptly, cursing himself for almost letting that piece of information slip. Surely this Harry didn't have access to that information.

"The Horcruxes, I know," Violet finished for him, her tone bored. "He told me. How you found out . . ."

Harry quickly changed the subject. "Listen, if you're still pissed at him, fine; but you don't want him to face Voldemort unprepared, do you?"

Violet didn't say anything for a moment. "Have fun with your essay," she said stiffly before retreating up the girl's dormitory.

Harry turned back to his homework, wondering why she didn't just talk to Neville if it bothered her so much. Girls are so moody, he thought, shaking his head.

"You're late, Harry."

"Sorry, Neville, Potions essay got the best of me."

"Glad I dropped it, then," Neville commented, his voice pleasanter than it had been lately. Harry, however, could hear its strain.

Harry nodded and scanned the room, pleased to see its appearance similar to when they had used the Room of Requirement for the D.A. Good, looks like all the books and equipment are here . . . Harry thought, making a brief mental note of the cushions, Dark Arts detectors, and numerous books.

"So," Neville said awkwardly, breaking the silence. "What're we doing?"

"Er –Patronus, I think," Harry said, "You'll want to have that down as soon as possible."

Neville nodded solemnly. "Guess you're right." Harry wondered if he too heard his mother's screams when the Dementors got too close.

Harry had never felt so awkward in Neville's presence before. Neville was completely different here –his eyes were hard, he swore, he hurt his friends with his words . . . but he seemed much more lost and vulnerable than the Neville Harry knew.

Actually, despite his prickly exterior, this Neville lacked the confidence Harry's Neville had gained over the years. Neville had never been good with pressure, and having the fate of the world on his shoulders definitely didn't help. The only real improvement this Neville had over the other was the lack of his trademark clumsiness.

"Harry? Should we get started?"

Snapping out of his thoughts, Harry nodded distractedly.

“Er –why don’t you try it so I can see what you’ve got so far?”

Neville nodded mechanically, squeezed his eyes shut, and said firmly, “Expecto Patronum!”

An extremely thin shield of silver mist surrounded Neville. However, despite Neville being much older than Harry had been when he began learning, the feeble Patronus Neville conjured was much weaker than Harry’s first try.

“Good start,” Harry lied.

Neville frowned, his expression suddenly icy. “That Patronus was bloody awful, Harry. It’s been that way from the start.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, taken aback at Neville’s attitude. “Er –okay. Sorry for being too bloody encouraging, mate.”

It was Neville’s turn to be surprised. “Wh –what?” he stuttered, as if he couldn’t believe someone would have the nerve to talk back to him. Violet must be one of few who can sort of get away with it, Harry mused.

“You heard me,” Harry responded loudly, peeved at Neville’s attitude. “Stop being such a damn baby –it’s getting old.”

A flash of outrage crossed Neville’s features, making Harry wonder why everyone’s personalities were so different just because Harry wasn’t the Boy-Who-Lived. Neville had been so eager to join the D.A., and loved it, yet this Neville was only reluctantly allowing Harry to tutor him as a last resort. Surely he’d want to defeat Voldemort, the monster who murdered Neville’s family and left him an orphan.

No. The monster who murdered Harry’s parents, made Harry an orphan. Merlin, everything was so different; it almost felt as if Lily and James had never died, that they’d always been there, that Violet always existed, and that Sirius never fell behind the veil.

He could almost believe that Neville had never been passive, Hermione had never had any friends, and Ron had never been Harry's best mate.

"Do you really want to learn this?" Harry asked. "Cause if you don't, might as well stop now so you don't waste my time."

Neville narrowed his eyes, his only response being a very forced "Expecto Patronum!" which produced a Patronus weaker than the previous.

"Your memory wasn't happy enough," Harry informed him.

"Well what the bloody hell do you want from me?" Neville fumed, his face quickly turning red in frustration. "Why don't we pluck a jolly memory from your head if I'm so inadequate?"

Struggling to keep his expression calm, Harry asked, "What was your memory?"

"I'm not telling you!"

Harry desperately wanted to tell Neville to shove his wand up his two-year-old arse, but managed to reel that desire in. However, he did mutter, "This was a complete waste of my time."

"And what would you rather be doing now?" Neville demanded fiercely, "Flying around the Quidditch pitch for the hundredth time, forget we're in a damn war? Snogging your girlfriend? Snogging another girl –"

"I would never do that to Ginny," Harry snarled, the desire to break Neville's jaw growing stronger. "But what have you been doing with my sister? If you hurt her, I swear I'll –"

"Do what, Potter? You'll do what? Fly around me in circles? Bat a Bludger at me, you overprotective son of a –"

The force of Harry's right hook sent Neville sprawling on the ground, nursing a swollen cut lip. Neville stared at the sticky blood on the

finger touching his lip, accessing the damage. Harry stood over him as both boys glared at each other, breathing hard. The tense silence ticked away until Neville kicked Harry's legs from under him.

With a furious "Ow!" Harry joined Neville on the carpet, struggling to regain his dignity and reign in his desire to strangle The Chosen One then and there, Voldemort or no.

Neville also seemed to be having trouble controlling his self restraint. However, instead of doing something violent, he spoke with deadly fury in his eyes. "I've told you before; me and Violet are just friends. Friends. As in a bloke and a girl who hang out and don't snog the living air out of each other. But then, what would you know about that?"

That said, Neville picked himself up and silently made his way to the door, making sure to shut it as loudly as he could on the way out. "Okay, everyone but Chasers clear out!"

Harry quickly noted everyone who dragged their brooms on the floor as they walked off the Quidditch pitch; players who were sloppy with broom care almost always were sloppy fliers.

Though there was still a decent amount of people hoping to get on the team, Harry was extremely relieved to note that their number was substantially smaller than it had been in sixth year, when a group of non-Gryffindors had tried out.

Wincing at the mere memory of the utter chaos that ensued, Harry sincerely hoped that this time around, the tryouts would be a bit more orderly. And to be honest, there wasn't really that much choice.

Most of them were decent, some were painfully horrible, but only about four proved themselves to be exceptional or worth looking at. Ginny and Demelza, whose flying ability did not surprise Harry, had a definite spot on the team. Dean was a consideration, but, once again, Harry already knew he was a good flier, though not better than any of his original Chasers last year.

What was a pleasant shock was Violet, who proved to be an excellent Chaser. She seemed extraordinarily at ease in the air, despite the pressure of the tryouts, almost peaceful . . . like how Harry felt when he flew. But then, it really shouldn't be a surprise—after all, James Potter was a Chaser when he was in Hogwarts, and she, like Harry, must have the Quidditch genes.

After telling the rejected Chasers to clear the pitch, Harry gave his final four the Quaffle to pass around rapidly in the air, paying close attention to which three worked together the best. All four were good fliers, but if the group he assembled couldn't work as a team, then the whole season was shot.

As he watched them play, it became clear that Dean was the one who had to go. He tended to be a bit of a ball hog, whereas the three girls seemed to fly as one.

Harry's shrill whistle signaled the players to get back on the ground, awaiting his judgment. He really didn't like cutting people, especially if he personally knew them. Would Dean become a bit frosty with him like he was the year before?

"Er —Ginny, Violet, and Demelza, welcome back. Dean —I'm sorry. You flew really well, but you'll be on the reserve team."

Dean blinked, looking dazed. "You —you're demoting me? But I was on the team last year; Demelza was on the reserve! I thought we were mates!"

Harry cringed inwardly, never being one who liked personal conflicts, but kept a neutral expression. "She flew better than you."

Eyes flashing in both anger and disappointment, Dean stomped off the pitch, pushing past a rejected third year as he went.

"He'll get over it," Ginny assured, "He always does."

Demelza grimaced. "I wouldn't have thought he'd be so angry, though."

Harry sighed and clasped her shoulder. "Don't think on it too much; you did fly better than him . . . you deserve this spot."

After that, they moved on to the Beater tryouts, where Harry brought back Jimmy Peakes and a new sixth year, Terrance Chamberlain, who Harry recognized as being in his compartment on the train.

By the time Keeper tryouts rolled around, the crowd of onlookers had increased, though this time it didn't surprise Harry, nor did he worry about Ron's nerves. It would seem that this Ron had enough nerve to go around –that, and a dangerous lack of tact.

However, Ron did look a bit worried. Harry couldn't help but notice the furtive glances that came his way, as if Ron believed Harry would be petty enough to cut him from the team just because he disapproved of his relationship with Ginny.

Well, Harry was seriously considering cutting him just for that punch Ron had delivered.

But Ron was a good Keeper; it just wouldn't be fair. Besides, Harry knew he'd just feel guilty about it afterward, so might as well prevent it while he had the chance.

As Harry watched each of his Chasers take their turn trying to score on the Keepers, he couldn't help but notice that, despite whatever Demelza said about Ron's head being up in the clouds, he seemed to possess much more self-confidence, which enabled him to concentrate on the Quaffle. The result of this new development was a very good Gryffindor Keeper.

And, fortunately or unfortunately for Harry, Ron out-saved the rest of the hopefuls, proving himself to be the undeniable choice for a return to the position.

"Thanks to everyone for coming today. You guys all flew really well today; Ron, you've got the position."

Ron nodded, looking pleased but trying not to at the same time.

Soon, all the rejected players and spectators returned to the castle, eagerly discussing the coming Quidditch season or moaning about how “Potter should have picked me –I’m better looking than any of them anyway.”

Harry looked around at his assembled team, proudly noting how many familiar faces there were from his team last year; it eased his nerves, made him feel less like a stranger intruding on their lives.

“Let’s start by doing a couple of laps around the pitch,” Harry said brightly, ignoring the loud groans of everyone who’d been on his team before.

“It’s only the first practice, Captain,” Violet pointed out, scowling, “And a ‘couple of laps’ usually means ‘loads of laps till you drop out of the bloody sky’, innit?”

Harry smirked. She knew him too well. “Got to whip you lot into shape, don’t I? Get going.”

Harry watched fifty laps go by, glad to find that Quidditch was still the same, even in this place. However, when Ginny decided enough was enough, she really did drop out of the sky, sending Harry into a panic and streaking after her into a dive, pulling up when he saw her feet gently skimming the grass and smiling sweetly at him, completely conscious.

Noticing the other players looking at her in envy, Harry decided that fifty laps were good enough. However, he wouldn’t let them go until they had finished a couple of passing and accuracy drills first.

“I think somebody wants the Cup this year,” Ginny teased playfully, her face still flushed from flying.

Harry had to grin at that. “Can’t let the Slytherins best us, can we?”

“No, McGonagall would murder us,” Ginny said, smiling.

“She’ll be sneaky about it, though; no one’ll ever know.”

“Yeah, she’ll wait until all of us graduate; make it look like an accident. The Aurors will find us all mauled by a tabby.”

They looked at each other, futilely resisting the grins erupting on their faces before breaking into laughter. It really wasn’t that funny, death, but when it’s all around, threatening to choke and consume you, what else can you do but laugh?

Harry stared into Ginny’s smiling face, becoming lost in those sparkling blue eyes. Before he knew it, his lips were seeking hers, accepting the warmth they gave. It didn’t matter that they were dry and chapped from flying for hours, only that they were hers.

“Get you lips off her!”

Resisting the urge to sink into the grass, he thought about deepening the kiss to further infuriate Ron, but decided against it.

“Stop being such a git Ronald,” Ginny said crossly, “D’you see me telling you and Lavender off?”

“Well I’m old enough to know what’s dangerous and what’s n –”

“So Harry’s a dangerous cannibal now? Going to bite my lips off, is he?”

“You don’t want to hang around with people of his sort!” Ron exclaimed loudly.

Harry blinked, scowling angrily. “People of my sort?”

Ron’s ears reddened. Sputtering indistinguishable words, he reached out to grab his sister’s arm, but Ginny moved herself out of arm’s reach.

“Lay off Ron! Or I’ll tell Mum and her about the you-know-what!” Ginny hissed.

If possible, Ron’s ears became a deeper shade of puce red. “You wouldn’t,” he whispered.

“Calm down, you lot,” Demelza said sharply, getting plowed over by Ron as he suddenly lunged towards Harry. In a beat, Terrance and Jimmy were there, helping Demelza to her feet and restraining Ron.

“It’s my life, Ron! You can’t baby me forever!” Ginny bellowed.

Ron’s ears were now in danger of popping off his skull. “I’m trying to protect you Ginny!”

“From who, Ron? From who? Harry? McGonagall? You-Know-Who? Mum? Who?”

“I’ve already told you,” Ron said stubbornly, fighting Terrance and Jimmy’s hold.

“Stop being so thick,” Demelza scolded, “Leave well enough alone before you make things worse.”

“Shut up, you,” Ron snapped nastily.

Slap.

Ron’s freed hand immediately went to his imprinted cheek, staring at his fuming little sister in shock. “Wh –what did you –” he stuttered.

Ginny’s eyes were now shimmering dangerously, angry tears threatening to fall. “Don’t talk to me, and leave Demelza alone. What’d she every do to you, you disgusting prick?”

With that, she turned and retreated to the girl’s locker room. After giving his teammates an apologetic look, Harry followed her, forgetting the fact that he wasn’t technically allowed in the girl’s bathroom.

“Gin?” Harry called, hearing her voice inside.

As he approached the source of the echoing, Harry picked up on what Ginny had been saying.

“Wake up...wake up!”

“What’s going on?” Harry asked, concerned.

Ginny looked up, all trace of anger gone. However, the worried expression she held didn’t do anything to ease Harry’s discomfort. Then, his eyes focused on what was next to his girlfriend, or rather – who.

Violet was passed out on the floor, unmoving and unresponsive.

Cold terror seized Harry as horrible possibilities rushed to through his mind. Luckily, the subtle rise and fall of her chest proved that she was still alive. Now, anger began to set in as he realized what his sense of déjà vu meant.

How could she do that to Ginny and Harry, scaring them shitless and taking up that damn sleeping potion again after she’d been caught?

“Enervate,” Harry said clearly, but Violet’s eyes remained closed.

“I already tried that,” Ginny said, “Nothing works.”

“Okay, we’ll have to get her to the hospital wing. Locomotor Violet.”

Violet’s body didn’t budge.

Harry frowned. How long has she been taking that potion? And how does it make her resistant to spells?

“We’ll have to carry her –er, I guess I will.” Harry said, scooping up his surprisingly light sister.

“Merlin, it’s just one thing after another today,” Ginny murmured, glancing at her friend in worry.

Try having that happen to you every day since you were eleven, Harry thought wryly.

“They had better not have gotten themselves expelled.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic dear –they did promise after all,” Lily responded idly, placing breakfast on the table. “And besides, if they’d gotten expelled, it’d be titled ‘To Mummy and Daddy,’”

“Mmm, but Harry wouldn’t do that, and this is his handwriting. Besides, today’s Halloween –don’t you remember the yearly Marauder prank on Halloween?”

“Have some faith, James; it’s not even the afternoon yet.”

“Let’s just open the bleeding letter instead of sitting around talking about it,” James responded impatiently, “It’s making me more nervous by the second.”

Lily raised her eyebrows. “This is coming from Hogwarts’ most frequent presence in detention?”

“Actually, Sirius holds that title. He nicked the last detention of our Hogwarts career, the bloody wanker.”

Rolling her eyes, Lily dangled the letter in front of her husband. “Get it over with, James.”

Scowling, James took the letter and read it, his frown deepening the longer he read. Silently, he handed it to his wife and began pacing the length of the dining room.

Once she finished reading Harry’s letter, Lily set the parchment down gently, suddenly looking tired. “I should have known the Dementor was going to have a lasting effect.”

“It’s alright, Lily; Violet’s always been really private. What matters now is what we’re going to do about it.”

“But what –I mean, Muggles have a detox process, but I don’t know about wizarding potions –”

James stopped pacing. “We need to go to Hogwarts, talk to her. Let’s Floo Minerva.”

“Why don’t you do that? I’ve got to make a quick stop at the Ministry to talk to Mad-Eye.”

“Why?” James asked suspiciously, eyes narrowing.

Lily stood up, placing her hands on her hips and attempting to look as menacing as possible. “I’m asking him to extend my active duty time, see if I can take maternity leave later than I was going to.”

“And why would you want to do that?”

“I want to fight, James; I need to fight. I can’t just sit around and –and do nothing!”

James frowned, but his eyes pleaded with her. “You’re not doing nothing, Lils; you’re pregnant, do you really want to risk both yourself and the baby?”

Lily grabbed the scruff of James’s shirt and yanked it down so he was eye-level with her. “That’s a stupid question, James. Of course I don’t want anything to happen to us; but if I can stay on duty for a week, maybe two, how many lives will benefit from having one more Auror helping them? We’re not exactly numerous anymore, James, not since all the murders.”

“And how many will die because of your liability?” James shot back, suddenly angry, “I’m sorry, Lils, but it’s true; you being out there can be as much of a danger to all of us as a help.”

Her green eyes sparkled dangerously. “Are you calling me incapable? I’m just as good an Auror –maybe better –than all of you big strong men in the force –”

Unfortunately, she couldn’t finish her rant, as James’s lips had swooped down to capture hers, effectively silencing her.

“Nobody thinks you’re incapable,” James said quietly, “But everyone knows you’re pregnant; they –men and women –will be looking out for you especially, maybe at their expense. Someone might not be

able to concentrate, and a Death Eater could sneak up on them without their knowing . . .”

“Alright, you’ve made your point,” Lily said sharply, though her eyes softened. “One week, James, just one week. How do you think I’ll feel if someone we know dies, and I wasn’t there to try to prevent it?”

James sighed deeply, knowing how stubborn his wife was. But he also knew how very capable a fighter and mother she was, and he’d have to trust that she knew what she was doing. “I’ll Floo Minerva, you pop in to talk to Mad-Eye; if he asks my opinion of this, tell him that I gravely disapprove.”

Lily planted a quick peck on his lips. “See you later, then.”

Grinning, James kissed the subtle bump of Lily’s stomach and said, “Bye baby.”

Despite herself, Lily had to roll her eyes at her husband’s antics, preparing to Floo to the Ministry using the special network attached to their fireplace.

“The British Ministry of Magic!” Instinctively holding her stomach protectively, Lily stepped into the emerald flames, feeling herself spinning around and around until she landed gracefully on the other end.

She never liked this room; it was too gloomy. So she dusted the remaining ash off herself while heading towards the door so that when she opened the door to the atrium, all remnants of Floo travel would be gone.

“Lily Potter,” she said, presenting her wand. After the secretary did a quick check, determining that she was indeed Senior Auror Lily Potter, she handed Lily her I.D.

Though Lily fully intended to go straight to Mad-Eye, and then get back home so she and James could go to Hogwarts together, something bothered her. Her finger hovered over the elevator’s

control panel, about to press the button that would get her to Auror headquarters

She wasn't exactly sure why; maybe it was her maternal instincts kicking in, but she felt like this was the right time to ask again about what Draco Malfoy knew about his Master's upcoming plans. Draco had never felt so much pain in his life.

Panting heavily, he struggled to push himself off the floor, to hold on to whatever shred of dignity he had left. Look them in the eye, his father would say if he were here.

But he wasn't here, and it was just Draco and the two bastards torturing him. Light side my arse, he thought bitterly. So much for holding the moral high ground.

His efforts to stand up were in vain, as another dose of the Cruciatus threw him back on the ground, his screams clawing out of his hoarse throat. Damn you Potter! Draco thought as the curse was lifted off, Damn your hero complex. If Potter hadn't intervened, if he hadn't come to save them, Draco wouldn't be in this situation, being kicked and thrown around like a rag doll for who knows how long. He didn't even know how long he had stayed in this dreaded cell –days, weeks, months, years; it was all the same to him. If only Potter would have minded his own business, stayed concerned with saving himself and his sister . . .

But then, Parvati Patil would have been dead.

He coughed violently, blood speckling the ground. Draco rested his face on the cool ground, savoring the momentary numbness. Just kill me already, he thought tiredly, lacking the energy to shout at his aggressors anymore.

Suddenly, a swift kick to his ribs made Draco curl into himself, attempting to protect his body in any way possible.

"What's You-Know-Who's plan? What is he planning to do next?" the kicker asked, his voice hard.

“We can make it stop, you know,” the other said, his tone a mockery of mercy, “It doesn’t have to hurt like this. Just tell us, and we’ll stop.”

Merlin, did he want it to stop. Draco was sure that if he hadn’t been subjected to “toughening sessions” similar to this by the Dark Lord’s top Death Eaters, he would have cracked long ago.

The Aurors seemed to take his silence as a no. “Have it your way, then,” one said, making a slashing movement with his wand.

Draco groaned when he heard the crunch somewhere in his body as his body fell from the wall it had been sent into. He could feel his own blood smearing on the wall behind him, but he took no notice of it. Already there were spots in his vision; the advancing men seemed to become more and more out of focus.

Finally . . . Draco thought in relief, wanting the darkness of unconsciousness to take him away from the bloody room, with these evil good guys.

Unfortunately, they weren’t done with him yet. “Not so fast; Crucio!”

Draco’s body was again assaulted with millions of knives, effectively waking him up as his nerves were on fire. He had always thought that if you were subjected to the Cruciatus curse long enough, you’d build some sort of resistance or at least some numbness to it.

That theory was disproved the hard way; with each dose, everything only hurt more. Draco tasted blood in his mouth, on his lips; if he kept this up, he’ll bite his tongue in half. Unable to contain the screams in his raw throat, he let it out, every second of agony feeling like an eternity.

Then, the pain stopped. At first, he just laid on the ground, unable to move. For a horrifying moment, he thought all of his nerves had been fried, that he had become trapped in an immobile body. But his fingers twitched impulsively, scratching the unforgiving floor as though it was still under the Cruciatus. With whatever concentration he had left, he made his finger stop, and then closed his eyes while waiting for the next dose, which never came.

As his senses began to tune back into reality, he caught snippets of very angry yelling.

“-bloody hell do you think you’re doing?”

“-don’t understand –”

“A necessity, the prisoner wasn’t talking.”

“The ‘prisoner’ is a minor, a seventeen-year-old kid –”

“A Death Eater. Please just think about this –”

“There’s nothing to think about. How would your wife feel if she knew you were willing to torture a child, Williamson? Think she’d feel safe having you hold your daughter?”

“That’s completely different,” Williamson said, sounding frustrated, “We’re just doing our jobs.”

“Doing your job means being above the Death Eaters, an example. You’ve lowered yourself to their level; look at the state of him! He looks like he’s just spent weeks as Bellatrix Black’s new wind up toy.”

“Ma’am,” the other Auror said, his voice straining to be polite to his superior officer, “We are under specific orders from Minister Scrimgeour himself to use any means necessary to extract the information out of the prisoner.”

“Draco Malfoy, Proudfoot; that’s his name, not ‘the prisoner’.”

“Meaning no disrespect ma’am, but please don’t try to bloody humanize everything. This piece of shit would have done the same to us if he had the chance.”

“It’s our humanity that separates us from them.”

Draco finally found the strength to open his eyes to see his defender. At first, he had thought for a brief, wonderful moment that it had been

his mother, but the unfamiliar voice scratched that option out. The first thing that caught his eye was bright red, which he distinguished as someone's hair.

Please don't tell me I owe a Weasley for saving me, Draco pleaded with whatever force was listening.

"Both of you, get out. Looks like I'm going to have to clean up your messes. NOW!" she bellowed as Williamson and Proudfoot hesitated.

As she neared Draco, it became evident that she wasn't a Weasley, but a Potter. More specifically, the Mudblood mother of Harry and Violet Potter, whom Draco had just been cursing in his mind. Why was his life so ironic?

But really, with his body broken and aching as it was now, he couldn't be choosy about who decided to help him. However, it did confuse him; why would Potter's mum help him? But then, the Potters had always been goody-goodies about morality and such; he remembered his father talking about how they had campaigned heavily against Rufus Scrimgeour's decision to allow Aurors to perform Unforgivable Curses.

Merlin, he really was a little arrogant prat, wasn't he? After all, shouldn't he be happy that anyone stuck up for him, the Death Eater that everyone hates? A lot of the Ministry officials knew of his involvement with Professor Dumbledore's death, that he was up there, had his wand trained on him . . .

He never wanted to kill him. Merlin, Professor, you know that don't you? Well . . . he had intended to, because he already got a glimpse of what would happen to his father and mother if he didn't, but still . . . given a choice, he'd never have tried. It was hopeless anyway. He just wasn't any good at being a Death Eater. He'd never been good enough; just a spineless bully, like Potter had shouted at him during his initial interrogation.

He didn't deserve to live; he didn't deserve to be helped. Draco wished that those Aurors had accidentally, or even purposely, killed him today; it's not like it would have been a loss to the world.

Listening to himself, Draco never felt more pathetic and miserable in his life, not even during sixth year when he showed his weakness to an equally pathetic ghost, crying over the bathroom sink like some little wimp, a first year in a sixth year's body.

He hated himself, yet didn't want, nor felt worthy of, pity.

So when Lily Potter knelt down to examine his injuries, he shied away from her, not wanting her help. He just wanted her to go away, let his dignity completely disappear in peace.

However, she misinterpreted his reaction. "I'm not going to hurt you," she reassured him gently, "I just want to have a look at these injuries."

Even though Draco knew she only wanted to help, he could help but feel extremely violated; he made a point not to let anyone see him as vulnerable as he was now, as pathetically broken.

Lily Potter's fingers were gentle as she surveyed the extent of the damage, and he could feel her concern radiating off of her; it must be bad.

"Those bloody bastards," she muttered to herself, "Turned into Scrimgeour's cronies."

It was all Draco could do to keep from sighing in relief as he felt various Healing Spells begin cast on his wounds, lifting the lingering agony from his body. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of healing, he had been sufficiently healed.

"I wasn't able to heal everything –looks like we'll have to get you to the Hospital Wing."

He meant to thank her; really, he did, but his bitterness had possessed his speech. "The light side's not so high and mighty on the morality scale, now are they?"

Draco winced inwardly, knowing what her reaction probably was. Disgust at how ungrateful he was after she'd saved his arse.

However, when he built up enough courage to meet her eyes, there wasn't disgust, but pity in them.

How he hated pity.

"They made a mistake, a wrong judgment; however, those of us on Dumbledore's side –we make a point to try. Nobody's perfect; we'll falter in trying to stay above people like Lord Voldemort –please don't flinch –but the difference between us and them are that we keep trying."

Draco made no answer, but this got him thinking. Maybe, if he did this, he wouldn't be so useless and pathetic after all. If he was awful at being a Death Eater, if he didn't have the ability to kill, if he no longer blindly believed their cause –then why stay? They were all a bunch of sadistic, un-hygienic, and thoroughly dirty-mouthed group, the lot of them. Well, except for his family and Professor Snape –though his personal hygiene is debatable.

The Dark Lord was going to kill him anyway, if he ever got out, as punishment for getting captured. He didn't want to die. There's really no point in going back; maybe, if he helped Dumbledore's side, he could save his own skin.

Maybe he can somehow make up for Professor Dumbledore's death, which would never have happened if he hadn't schemed to let the Death Eaters into the school.

"The Dark Lord's planning an attack," he said hoarsely.

Lily Potter turned sharply towards him. "What?" she said.

"An attack, on Hogsmede; it's supposed to help him so it'll be easier to hit Hogwarts."

She smiled, and there was something akin to pride and triumph on her face. "Thank you; this'll help save many lives. When is this supposed to happen?"

"Halloween night."

Her smile dropped, and the color drained out of her face.

"What is it?" Draco asked, a sense of dread and worry washing over him. "What day is it today?"

Lily Potter looked at him, eyes wide and serious.

"Halloween."

Violet still wasn't speaking to him.

At least, not since she found out that Harry had written to their parents, informing them about her potion abuse. Apparently, she hadn't taken too kindly to him "tattling" on her "like a rat".

Harry couldn't be blamed for getting a little angry at this remark, could he?

Well, perhaps his choice of words could be debated; he could have been a little bit more sensitive. Maybe he shouldn't have spoken at all.

Yeah. Probably.

Now, as they stood in line waiting to be scanned by Filch's Dark Detector, Violet refused to meet her brother's eyes, but glared viciously at him when she thought he wasn't looking. Harry cringed, remembering vividly the accusing betrayal in her eyes when Madame Pomfrey had told her that Harry had written to her parents. It was strange; though he'd only known her for a few months, he couldn't help but feel an odd sort of withdrawal – almost like the feeling he got every summer, when he was forced to go back to Privet Drive, away from Hermione, Ron, Hogwarts, and magic.

He'd really gotten attached to the people here in a short amount of time.

She had almost been unable to attend today's Halloween Hogsmeade visit, not because she was still recovering, but because Madame Pomfrey didn't want to give Violet an opportunity to stock up on Dreamless Sleep Potion. However, she said that it would be alright if she went as long as she was supervised by someone trustworthy.

Neville became that somebody, and needless to say that neither Violet nor Neville were very happy about this arrangement.

Harry highly suspected that Tonks had something to do with this.

At least the two of them could always talk about how much of a prick Harry was. Personally, Harry thought they were both being stupid; Violet was going down the road of self-destruction, and Neville was in no way prepared for the Final Battle, not when he wasn't even willing to swallow his pride, take some criticism, and learn the necessary skills.

Frankly, it kind of pissed him off. A lot.

So, instead of enjoying what would potentially be a very nice date with Ginny, he found himself worrying as he would before, when the weight of the world was on his shoulders –what would he do? After everything he's gone through, Harry didn't believe he could sit around and do nothing, despite the seductive option this place offered –a life with his parents, without the prophecy, everything he's ever dreamed of . . . it was tempting, especially when he knew that right now, he could go out with his beautiful, fiery girlfriend and shop without worrying about Death Eaters lurking in the shadows, waiting for him.

"Wake up boy! Turn around!" Filch barked at him grumpily.

"Sorry," Harry muttered, mechanically doing as he said.

"You're clean," Filch said rather resentfully, as if he'd been deprived of a treat.

Harry smirked, knowing Filch's penchant for getting students in trouble. But this time, it didn't really bother him; it was nice to know that something –even that smallest detail –was the same. Filch didn't suddenly get a personality transplant and become a nice, sweets-distributing care keeper who loved kids.

Now that would have been disturbing.

After Ginny had been scanned as well, the redhead slipped her arm around Harry's. "Shall we?" she asked in mock seriousness, as if they were going to a ball.

“Of course,” Harry responded playfully, “Can’t let the third-years hog all the candy, can we? Otherwise we’ll have a Grawp-sized case of obesity on our hands.”

“Grawp?” Ginny asked, confused.

“Er –Muggle term I picked up.” Harry said quickly, inwardly cursing at his mistake.

“From your mum?”

“Yeah.”

An awkward silence followed this, almost as if Ginny could sense that her boyfriend wasn’t being entirely truthful. This made Harry extremely uncomfortable; if Ginny –or anyone else, for that matter – were to discover his secret, he’d rather it’d be on his terms. Otherwise, he may have a lot of misunderstandings on his hands.

“What’s up with you, Violet, and Neville?” Ginny asked suddenly, catching Harry off guard.

“Er –nothing. Why?”

“They’ve been glaring at us ever since we got in line. Doesn’t look like nothing to me.”

“Got in a little spat, is all.”

“Bollocks, Harry. I’ve known the three of you for a long time –and that is not a little spat.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Harry snapped, wishing Ginny would just let this go and enjoy the Hogsmede weekend with him.

Ginny frowned, but didn’t press the matter any further. Their windswept faces red, the couple made their way to Honeydukes, and once they left, they were both in a considerably better mood. Ginny was smiling now as she acted as if she were about to eat her Cockroach Cluster.

“Reckon we should give this to Ron?” she suggested, eyes dancing mischievously.

Harry nodded in response, his stomach doing a flip as he recognized something of his Ginny in this one.

Ginny regarded him with a strange look on her face. “Harry? You okay?”

“Er –yeah. Just fine. Let’s go to Three Broomsticks for a butterbeer, shall we?”

“Okay,”

As usual, the Three Broomsticks was crowded with both students and teachers alike, laughing, talking, and drinking, temporarily free of worries concerning the war that was raging on outside of their little haven. As Harry and Ginny joined their ranks, Harry wasn’t surprised to find Ron and Lavender there as well, snogging. However, Ron apparently had some sort of Harry radar, because he looked up the moment they stepped in and glared fiercely at their held hands.

“Oh honestly,” Ginny said, clearly exasperated with her brother’s consistent immaturity. “I’ll grab us a table.”

Apparently Harry always did the paying. “Two butterbeers, please,” he said to Madame Rosmerta.

“Coming right up, hon,” she said, rapidly exchanging two bottles for Harry’s galleon. “Enjoy, it’s a lovely day.”

Harry looked out the window. It was a nice day, actually. Earlier it’d been windy and slightly overcast, but now the sun was shining merrily, and this made Harry smile. The last time there’d been this good of weather had been at Professor Dumbledore’s funeral.

“Thanks, Harry,” Ginny said, sipping her butterbeer and smiling at him. Then, she did something Harry didn’t expect –she leaned in and pecked Harry on the mouth with her sticky –and delicious –lips.

Blushing profusely but trying hard to act nonchalant about it, Harry wasn't sure what to make of this. Well, she was his girlfriend, but it was just so oddly normal. He wanted to tell Ginny how beautiful she was, how amazing and brave she had been during that night in the Department of Mysteries, though she shouldn't have gone with him in the first place . . .

But then he remembered that this Ginny hadn't gone with him. This Ginny wasn't the same –she was close, but not a copy. Harry felt disgusted with the idea of ever making a copy of the Ginny he knew. Suddenly he felt very fake, snogging this Other Ginny. He felt unfaithful, disloyal, even if they had broken up in his world.

“W –what was that for?” he asked instead.

“For being a prat about the Violet thing,” she responded, sitting back in her seat. “I’m sorry –it’s just that she’s been clearly bothered by something all year, and I –I can’t do anything to help her. She won’t talk to me. It’s frustrating. You know she’s my friend just as much your sister . . . I’m worried about her.”

She sounded so much like Ginny in that moment that Harry almost forgot his doubts, leaning forward and taking her hand. “She’s having a hard time,” he said, “I don’t know exactly what all of it is, but what I do know –it’s not up to me to tell you. If Violet wants you to know, she’ll tell you.”

Ginny sighed and looked out the window. “I know. I was probably pushing her too hard.” She looked at Harry with grave eyes. “You Potters have had to go through a lot of shit in your lives.”

She doesn’t know how right she is, Harry mused ironically.

Suddenly, screams filled Harry’s ears as he felt a rapid change in the atmosphere. Looking out the window, he realized that the sun had become hidden in clouds, that people were fleeing in the streets as ice and fog began to descend upon them. Without thinking, Harry leaped to his feet and rushed outside, where he got a good view of what was going on. He felt his body freeze, his muscles recognizing

the familiar sensation of ice in his veins, of horrors replaying themselves in his mind: his mother and father's now familiar voices, pleading, fighting; Wormtail, saying Kill the spare; Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore –all falling, dead . . .

Hundreds of Dementors descended upon Hogsmeade village, intent on leaving a ghost town of soulless shells littered upon the ground. Damn it, damn it, damn it! Lily cursed, realizing the implications of this. She had to notify the Aurors, the Ministry –most importantly, the Order. Harry and Violet were probably there, shopping and having fun now, not realizing what was about to happen.

She turned on her heel and began running back to the elevator, cursing the anti-Apparation spell that prohibited her from popping up to Moody's office.

“Wait!”

Lily turned, realizing that she'd completely forgotten about Draco Malfoy –and almost left a convicted criminal alone to run amok in the Ministry. But with one look at his desperate expression, she knew that running away or wrecking havoc wasn't on his mind at all.

“You're going to get Dumbledore's people, the Order's help, right?” he asked.

Lily nodded slowly, unsure where he was going with this.

“Can I go with you?”

She opened her mouth, the words absolutely not on the tip of her tongue, but she retracted them, thinking about this. He looked sincere enough, and he had given her the information. Perhaps he truly wanted to help. Perhaps she was going soft, feeling particularly maternal because of her pregnancy. But no time for musings; they were running out of time.

Sighing heavily, she waved her wand, binding him by magic to her. He couldn't go anywhere by himself now; he was now magically bound to follow her everywhere she went until she released the spell.

"Come on," she said, and began to run, Malfoy trailing behind her. Thinking quickly, Lily also used Wandless magic to make him blend in to his surroundings. There, she thought, now we can get there quickly.

Lily hit the elevator switch impatiently, worry and panic rising up inside her. What if they were too late? What if Harry and Violet were dead because the damn elevator was being sluggishly slow! Stupid contraption.

Though she felt exhausted, both from her pregnancy and her rapid use of her magic, she summoned enough strength to use the connection spell, which put her literally inside James's head – ironically, this was the spell they used when her husband had been interrogating the blonde boy beside her.

James?

Lily? I just spoke to Minerva. What's wrong?

James, you need to tell her that there's going to be a Dementor attack on Hogsmeade today.

What? An attack? How do you know?

Draco Malfoy told me –I trust him, James, he told me willingly; I think he really wants to help. Williamson and Proudfoot had been torturing him for information but –

On whose orders? James demanded, sounding angry.

Scrimgeour's.

Damn. I'll contact Sirius –he'll tell Remus, and they'll spread the word. Hopefully Minerva will still be in her office . . . I think she said something about going to the Three Broomsticks for a drink.

I'll tell Moody –I'm still waiting for the damn elevator, but what should I do with Malfoy?

Leave him with Moody.

Are you serious? Moody will rip him apart.

Mad-Eye can take care of him –Malfoy's only a kid, Lils, and I don't think he'll –

All Mad-Eye will see is a Death Eater.

Then he'll make sure he won't escape then, won't he? Actually, you could stay in Mad-Eye's office while he goes to fight . . .

We're wasting time arguing, James, and I refuse to leave my kids in danger.

There was a pause on the other end. Fine, Lily, but be careful –we don't know if Malfoy's really sincere. Meet at the Shrieking Shack. From there we'll figure out the perimeter, protect it as best as we can. We'll deploy some Aurors and Order members to clear the area, get the students to safety.

All right.

And the connection ended. However, as the elevator opened its wide mouth to greet them at last, Lily couldn't shake the sinking feeling in her stomach, the feeling that her children were in trouble now, that they may already be too late.

But they won't be, not if she could help it.

Harry's mind raced as memories and instinct overloaded his mind. There were hundreds. If there had been one –even five or six, maybe –he could have taken them. Hell, if there had been thirty, he was sure the threat would be squashed when the teachers pitched in. But there were so many . . . there definitely weren't enough teachers, and as far as he knew, Harry was the only student who knew how to perform a Patronus.

Shit.

Violet. He needed to find his sister, get her, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, everyone, to safety. To hell with her stupid cold shoulder –he was getting her to safety even if it meant dragging her by the hair all the way to Hogwarts.

“Harry!” Ginny was beside him now. “What’s going –bollocks.” She’s noticed the Dementors, and was now standing stiffly beside her boyfriend, eyes wide in fear.

“Ginny –grab your brother and Lavender. D’you have any idea where Violet and Neville would be?” Harry asked, thinking quickly.

“Wh –what?” Ginny asked, blinking fiercely.

“Ginny! Focus!” Harry snapped. They needed to take action now. “Get Ron, where’s Violet?”

Ginny shook her head, trying shake off the shock. “Er –I dunno. Vi likes Honeydukes, Zonko’s –everything, really.”

“Damn it. All right, get your brother.”

Ginny nodded and immediately tried to push through the throng of people running hysterically out of Three Broomsticks. Screams filled the air as the ice neared them, yet Harry was the only one that remained standing still. He could just get them to Hogwarts, and pray that Violet and Neville had found their way out as well but –oh sod it. He really did have a hero complex.

Harry just couldn’t risk the chance that his sister and friend weren’t okay. If they got the Kiss, and he had just left them to fate, he didn’t know what he’d do with himself.

“Harry! We’ve got to get to Hogwarts,” Ginny called urgently, already beginning to shiver.

“You go on,” he replied, knowing they’d be okay as long as they stuck together and stayed within the crowd, “I’m going to find Violet and Neville.”

“Are you mad?” Ron exclaimed, and for the first time, Harry detected concern in his best friend’s voice, “You’ll be killed!”

Harry shook his head. They needed to get out of here now; no time for arguing. “She’s my sister, Ron –I can’t abandon family.”

Something strange passed Ron’s face, a fleeting expression that Harry could have sworn was respect. “She can find her way back to Hogwarts.”

“But what if she can’t!” Harry snapped impatiently. The longer Ron and Ginny stayed, the greater their chance of being Kissed increased. “I’m going after her.”

Ginny grabbed his arm, eyes determined. “I’m coming with you.”

“No,” Harry said quickly, “You’re going with Ron, to safety.”

Such fire blazed in Ginny’s eyes that Harry was convinced that she was one and the same with his Ginny. He recognized that determination, that drive –it was the same that Ginny held that night, when they went to the Department of Mysteries.

“Okay,” Harry said, before he really thought about it.

“No!” Ron protested, “If Ginny’s coming, then so am I. You need the backup.”

“Neither of you can perform a Patronus,” Harry argued.

“But it’s better than you having to face them alone,” Ginny pointed out.

Harry gritted his teeth, seriously disliking this idea. But if he knew them like he thought he did, they wouldn’t relent until Harry finally accepted, and the longer they argued, the less chance they had of finding Violet and Neville.

“All right, fine,” he said reluctantly, “But Lavender –you get back to the school.”

Lavender hesitated, feeling obligated to stay with Ron, but afraid to risk her life for people she barely knew.

“It’s alright,” he reassured her, “Go. You can’t help here.”

It may have been a little harsh, but it worked, and Lavender didn’t seem to mind. After a “good luck” and one last worried glance at the group, she joined the throng of fleeing students, eventually disappearing into the crowd.

After making sure she was safely under the cover of the crowd, Harry beckoned to Ron and Ginny to follow him. Together, they snuck towards danger, checking shops as they went, but didn’t find anyone still inside until almost a block down, where a small group of third years were huddled together in the corner of Zonko’s, white faced and scared to go outside into the ice. Through the shop window, they could see the owner ushering the kids into the back room, all the while taking nervous glances behind him.

They weren’t too far from the crowd; maybe they could help them. Harry entered the shop and found the jumpy shopkeeper’s wand pointed at his face, but lowered it once he realized that they were just more students.

“Get in the back room, quick,” he said urgently, opening the door wide for them.

“Listen, there’s a big crowd heading back to Hogwarts now a block from here –if you hurry, you can catch up with them.”

But the shopkeeper shook his head. “Not enough time until those Dementors get here. Better hide than run in the open.”

He had a point. But Harry knew a quicker way to get back to Hogwarts. “There’s a secret passage in Honeydukes’s cellar that goes straight to Hogwarts –take that, it’s close to here.”

The shopkeeper looked surprised. “How d’you know that?”

Harry waved that aside. “I just do. Look, it’ll save all of you, so just take it.”

“But I don’t know where to go –or what to do when I get there.”

“Ron knows the way –he’ll show you.”

The redhead turned around, an incredulous expression on his face. “How did you know I knew that secret passage?”

Oops. “My dad was Prongs. Look, I just know, and you’re going to have to trust me on this. Take Ginny and get them all to Hogwarts safely.”

Harry willed Ron with all his might to just go; he didn’t want to risk Ron’s life any more than he had to, even if he was a right bastard in this world. However, at his words, Ginny had opened her mouth, about to protest, but Harry cut her off.

“There are some things I have to do myself, Ginny! You can’t come any further.”

Ginny, that same determined fire in her eyes, met Harry’s eyes, but relented, knowing that further arguing would only hinder their chances of survival. Soon they gathered the third years and employees out and they headed to Honeydukes, while Harry crept the opposite way, his senses on high alert for the tell-tale coldness.

And he did feel it –on his back.

Turning around, he saw that four Dementors had swooped down on the group, bitter ice freezing them. The shopkeeper called out a Patronus that got rid of one, but the others easily squashed the weak silvery figure, encasing them in darkness once more.

Suddenly, a flash of red broke away from the group. Ginny dodged the Dementors and began running down, calling wildly and sending random spells at them, trying to divert their attention towards her.

“G –Ginny, no!” Ron called out, but he was smothered by the eerie breathing of the Dementors, now swooping down upon Ginny, who continued to send out spells towards them in vain. As she stumbled to the ground, helpless, Ron ran around the Dementors and stood in front of her with his arms out.

“Get away!” he growled at the Dementors with chattering teeth, despite knowing that it would do no good. “Stupefy! Impedimenta! STUPEFY!”

It was no use; he had fallen. But as his friend fell, Harry was running towards them, dark voices and images ringing in his head. However, his determination to save his friends overrode all of his nightmares as he thought nothing but that beautiful June day, he, Ron, and Hermione sitting beneath the old tree, carefree and without fear – “EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

Prongs galloped out of Harry’s wand, his silvery antlers bowed regally as he charged at the three Dementors, purity emulating off of him, and drove them away, relieving the darkness that had been cast over the group.

The stag galloped back to Harry, allowing its warmth to wipe away the nightmares better than any bar of chocolate could. Prongs seemed to be much more of a comfort now that Harry had met his human counterpart. Slowly, with Harry’s hand on Prong’s long, arching neck, he faded away, and Harry could have sworn that there was a triumphant smirk on the Patronus’s lips.

“What were you thinking?”

Harry turned around at Ron’s voice, directed towards Ginny. However, he didn’t sound particularly –more relieved.

"It was going to get us –I had to do something," Ginny responded, sounding shaken. Harry walked over to the siblings and gently helped them up from the ground.

"You're probably safe for a few minutes –hurry." Harry said urgently. That incident just now scared him –he didn't want to be too far to be able to help them if they got attacked again. Come to think of it, he hadn't seen any of the hundreds of Dementors in the area since walking into Zonko's. However, this didn't reassure his nerves –Harry wanted to know where his enemies were.

"Potter?"

Harry turned back around to face Ron. "Yeah?"

"Thanks, mate –for saving us." Ron said sincerely.

"No problem," Harry responded, "But you've got to hurry."

Nodding, Ron gently prodded his sister and rejoined the group of shaking third years. Harry watched them go a ways, until they were only a shop or two before Honeydukes before making his way down the other road.

Despite knowing that this day could very well turn out to be a tragic one, Harry's heart filled with hope –at least today, he had made some progress.

Violet shivered, knowing they were only going towards the bastards. But where else could they go? Every single damn turn they took, that chill remained, and with every step she took, the echoes in her head grew louder. She glanced over at Neville, her reluctant babysitter, who spent the majority of their Hogsmede trip sulking –she didn't see what he really had to sulk about, not since he began pushing his friends away.

He didn't seem to be sulking now –instead, his face was scrunched up in an effort to do something –most likely thoughts of his parents' voices, screams, Voldemort's chilling words, all of which he only remembers near the Dementors, invading his mind.

They had tried to reach Honeydukes, to take that secret passage her Dad told her about, but found the only way there heavily surrounded by Dementors, though Violet noticed that they seemed to be migrating towards a certain area now . . . still, they hadn't cleared enough and Violet didn't like the idea of walking out in the open back to Hogwarts, in full view of any Death Eaters or Dementors around.

Violet winced, involuntarily shivering as a Dementor glided by above them. She found her arm being grabbed roughly as Neville pulled her into the shadows of a shop. He hasn't spoken a word to her the entire time, not even when the Dementors had first come in. Neville had just assumed that she would follow him, and that pissed her off royally. Arrogant bastard.

Biting her lip, Violet struggled to counter the nightmarish images in her head with happy thoughts about the upcoming birth of her much younger sibling, but once again found her thoughts primarily on her nightly nightmares, which had been occurring much more frequently than they had in past years for some reason. That, and Harry's peculiar attitude ever since his birthday.

Violet walked down the grounds, ignoring any waves or greetings that came her way. People would look at her oddly, as they had known the eleven-year-old since she was young, having played together in their pre-Hogwarts years because their parents knew each other.

Except the girl walking towards Hagrid's house wasn't Violet.

At least, it was her body, but she wasn't in control –she would have no recollection of it afterward, but the memory, the feeling of her mind being violated and perverted would stay deeply inscribed in her subconscious years after it happened, years after Neville Longbottom had saved her, with her brother figuring out the mystery, and Aurors and teachers in tow to help slay the snake.

But she didn't know that now –all she knew was that something had invaded her, making it so that she had no choice but to approach the chicken pen and strangle them with her bare hands, blankly ignoring the bleeding cuts on her hands from the roosters' desperate pecks.

She heard that seductive voice in her head, commanding her hands to muffle the rooster's choked cries against her school robes. Violet didn't like violence; she didn't like watching things die –she couldn't even watch when her daddy was forced to put down their pet cat, who'd grown sick with an illness that not even magic could cure, to put it out of its misery.

Yet she did it, without feeling remorse, because she didn't even have the ability to feel anymore. She felt numb; she liked feeling numb. It made it better –that what she was doing didn't seem so atrocious.

Her fingernails dug deeper into the rooster's throat, and it gave one more strangled cry before it expired.

Violet shook her head fiercely to get rid of the memory, but she could still hear the echoes of the rooster's last cry. Glancing over at Neville, she realized that his eyes were squeezed shut. He didn't make a sound, but she could tell by his expression that it was something horrible.

Instinctively, with a comfort gained from their years of friendship, Violet put her hand on his shoulder, gently squeezing it. Neville's eyes snapped open at her touch, but he didn't flinch, nor did he shake her hand off. His shoulders sagged into her hand, showing a neediness that was usually hidden beneath his arrogance.

Seeing her friend so broken and tired almost evaporated all of her anger with him, but she reminded herself that he was tired because he allowed the Ministry to control his life and walk all over him. The people who slandered him were now using him to their advantage.

"C'mon, the Dementor's gone," Violet whispered, the first words spoken between them the entire trip.

Neville nodded silently, squaring his shoulders back into his normally confident stance. And so they crept in the shadows, occasionally having to stop or slip behind cover whenever they saw the shadows under their eyelids, the ghosts that would appear hazily in the real world.

As they continued walking, Violet realized that they must be heading for a higher concentration of Dementors, because she kept on having flashes of memories, nightmares that seemed to come and go randomly.

She felt weak, very, very weak as she lay on the cold, wet ground, water gently splashing onto her drenched ankles. Blinking, Violet tried to make out the figure that stood above her, the dark-haired figure . . .

“H –Harry?” she called hoarsely, desperate for her big brother to come and save her. Maybe it was him –it looked so much like Harry.

“Shhh,” the figure said, in a voice meant to be comforting, “It’ll all be over soon.” That chilling, eager voice wasn’t her brother’s; she tried to get up, but couldn’t.

“Don’t bother –it’s useless. You’ll be dead soon anyway.”

Violet tore that memory out of her head, thinking about happy things, about Gryffindor winning the Quidditch Cup last year, how elated she felt as she touched the cool metal, as she passed it to their Seeker and Captain.

Didn’t work.

“Your Mudblood mummy is dead.” Draco Malfoy sneered at her and Harry.

“What are you talking about?” Harry demanded fiercely, grasping Violet’s hand tightly as he did so.

“D’you really think that anyone could survive the Dark Lord’s wrath? Especially Mudbloods, tonight?”

“What the bloody hell would you know about what was going on tonight?” Harry sneered, his disgusted expression tainted with fear in his eyes.

Malfoy smirked. “I have my . . . resources.”

Violet gasped, suddenly remembering Neville mentioning something, some dream about him walking down dark corridors. "The Department of Mysteries," she whispered.

Malfoy glanced at her sharply, shocked. "How –dunno what you're talking about," he recovered quickly, sticking his nose up in the air arrogantly.

"Mum isn't dead!" Violet shouted, releasing Harry's hand and advancing towards Malfoy dangerously, feeling such anger as she'd never felt before, a need to destroy that she hasn't felt since second year, when Tom Riddle's memory was influencing her. "Where's your mummy, you bloody wanker? Baking cookies for the Death Eater Humane Society? Maybe my Mummy's killed yours. Maybe your dogshit father is locked up in Azkaban now, going nutters. Maybe the noble bloody house of Malfoy is crumbling around your ears –and you're next."

Pushing him hard, the surprised Malfoy stumbled over a desk, causing him to flip over onto the other side.

Harry grabbed Violet's arm to stop her from hurting the blonde further, looking angry, proud, and a little scared. Violet shook off his arm, shaking slightly from her rampant emotions, that anger. Harry was looking at her in alarm, wondering what had gotten into his little sister, who had always been so quiet and subdued, except occasionally when she pulled pranks or was having a good enough time that she could forget her problems. Violet had never been particularly violent; even her pranks were fairly harmless.

As Violet's shock at what she had done subsided, self-disgust began to set in, and for the first time in nearly three years, she felt like she had been possessed all over again. Thus, she did the only thing she could have in that moment.

She ran.

Their pace changed as they came closer to the Shrieking Shack, their current destination. Both Violet and Neville wanted to get there as quickly as possible, to get to safety as quickly as possible. Violet only

hoped that Harry was okay –but he knew the secret passages as well, he must have made it there on time.

He had to.

But as another chill racked at her body, Neville's hand suddenly came hard across her chest, stopping her quick pace. Violet frowned, shoving his arm away from her, only to have him pull her roughly behind a lucky charm stand.

Violet hit him on the back of the head, her flashing eyes demanding an explanation for their sudden halt. Neville shook his head to silence her before pointing through a crack in the stand. Peering into it, Violet's eyes widened as ice cracked, spreading across the ground. But what horrified her was what she saw.

A sole student –a Slytherin third year, by the looks of her –stood, trembling in terror as a Dementor circled around her, slowly draining her of all of her hopes, her dreams for the future, her soul. The girl appeared to have resigned to her fate, because she didn't even try to run. Instead, she curled into herself, attempting to hang on to everything she could before it was taken away.

Violet watched this eerily quiet ritual with increasing horror. This was a Slytherin, a potential future Death Eater –yet the Dementor appeared to have no bounds, had no distinction between ally and foe. She felt sick just watching this, and as her own demons crept back into the shadows of her mind, Violet knew that she, as a human being, couldn't just sit there and do nothing.

But Neville held her down, apparently sensing her unease. She glared fiercely at him, unable to believe “the Chosen One's” cowardliness. However, he too looked rather ill, and as resigned as that Slytherin girl.

“We can't help her,” he whispered tiredly, looking extremely guilty that he had never learned the Patronus Charm from Harry, thus, in his own way, condemning this girl.

“Yes, we can!” Violet hissed, “Better try than do nothing!”

“Would you like to die in vain?” Neville snapped angrily, “Then be my guest.”

Violet was taken aback by this sharp comment, but knew inside that he was right. Slowly sinking back down to the ground, defeated, Violet forced herself to watch the Dementor suck the life out of the little girl, knowing that somebody had to be a witness to what had happened to her, so she wouldn't just disappear, just another casualty in a cruel war.

So, desperately fighting the darkness within her own mind, Violet also bore another's.

Harry had to send Prongs after several Dementors during the course of his search for his sister, but he considered himself lucky that they were as scattered as they were, although it did make him suspicious.

Much to his horror, he soon found where all the Dementors had gone.

A huge group of the fleeing people he had seen before sending Ginny and Ron to Honeydukes was cornered into a circle, flanked by most of the Dementors he had seen in the beginning. No Death Eaters in sight.

They circled the terrified group, and Harry felt a sudden spike of fear. There were so many . . . he knew he'd done this before, but even then, it'd only been about a hundred or so, with him completely confident because he knew he had technically already done it. But this was different. There were far more, and he felt that familiar weight settle back down on his shoulders. These people's lives were in his hands now; he doubted enough people escaped to tell the Aurors. Hopefully Ron and Ginny had made it back to Hogwarts in time to alert someone.

So he sat there, torn about what action to take. He couldn't just leave them there; that urge, what Hermione called his “hero-complex”, wouldn't allow him to. But if he did, would he just fall, would it even be worth it? If he was going to do something, he didn't want to just go out in a blind charge; he needed to think about this.

He needed Hermione.

But Hermione wasn't here, and the Hermione here probably wouldn't be of very much help. Harry really was on his own now; he thought this was what he'd wanted, but in reality, he just felt incredibly alone. Squatting in his hiding place, trying to make up his damn mind, Harry tried to weigh the loss of life if he did do something versus if he didn't.

Sod it. There was no way he could live with himself if he allowed someone to be hurt. Peeking through at the group, his eyes widened as a Dementor descended upon one of the store clerks, ready to give him the Kiss . . .

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry bellowed, Prongs leaping out of his wand and driving many surrounding Dementors away.

"Expecto Patronum!"

What?

Harry risked standing up in order to see where the chorus of Patroni came from. Never before had he felt so relieved.

Aurors flanked the group on all sides, silvery light encompassing the Dementors on all sides. Though Harry had to cover his eyes to prevent the brightness from blinding him, he thought it was rather beautiful to watch as the light conquered the dark.

The light faded, and Harry saw a few spare Dementors fleeing the area; however, it seemed that the combination of so many Patroni completely eradicated most of the Dementors. Letting out a breath Harry didn't know he'd be holding, Harry made his way over to the group, helping the lucky store clerk up from the ground.

"You okay?" he asked.

The clerk still seemed to be shaking –he knew how close he'd come. "Y –yes," he stuttered, but he didn't sound fine to Harry.

Harry dug into his pockets and handed him a chocolate frog he had bought in Honeydukes. "Eat—it'll help."

Taking the chocolate gratefully from Harry, the clerk was about to thank him when a Harry's slightly hysterical mum viciously grabbed Harry's shoulder and turned him around, making sure that it was indeed her son.

"Harry!" she cried out in relief, completely smothering him in a hug, "I can't –you're okay –was that your Patronus?"

Quite frankly, Harry had no idea what she was trying to say, so he merely nodded to answer her last question. Usually Harry wouldn't like people invading his personal space, but he didn't mind his mum squashing him. It was like Mrs. Weasley's hugs . . . just somehow better.

After managing to wriggle himself out of his mum's grasp, Harry asked, "Did Ron and Ginny tell you about the attack? Or Violet and Neville?"

Lily smiled. "Neither. Draco Malfoy did."

"Malfoy?" Harry asked, shocked, "Malfoy told you?"

But Harry's mother merely laughed at this, her warm, ringing tone a nice contrast to the iciness of the Dementors. Warmth and happiness spread throughout Harry's body better than any piece of chocolate could.

"How'd you get it out of him?" Harry asked, still surprised that the greasy little git would actually help them save lives. There must have been something in it for him; he struck a deal, or something.

But Lily's expression suddenly darkened, and she was no longer smiling. Instead, she looked as if she had just remembered something foul, something she still needed to do. "He wanted to prevent loss of life," she said finally, anger edged in her tone, "He –I dunno, he wanted to save himself, perhaps, but I honestly think he felt a genuine need to help us. I know you don't like him, Harry, and

that you have history with him, but you didn't see him. Scrimgeour ordered two Aurors to torture him –brutally. I hope you'll never have to see the shape he was in, the poor boy."

This was probably the first time anybody from the Light side has ever referred to Draco Malfoy in such a sympathetic light. It surprised Harry even more that it came from his mother, who has already been hurt so much by the Death Eaters and what they stand for. No doubt she'd lost many friends in the first war; the only friends of his parents that Harry has ever met were the three surviving Marauders, and even then . . . Harry quickly stopped his train of thought. He didn't want to think about Sirius falling through the veil again, or seeing Wormtail's pathetic face as he begged for mercy at Harry's feet. He should never have let him go.

The rush of anger Harry felt about Wormtail seemed to be reflected in Lily's face, except apparently towards the Minister.

"Lily, Harry!"

Mother and son turned around to see James Potter running towards them, looking immensely relieved. "Good, you've found him then," he noted, inclining his head towards Harry. "Where's Violet?"

"Aren't they here?" Harry asked, panicking slightly. "I –I thought they might have been here or at Hogwarts."

James shook his head. "Moody said that a group of Hogwarts students and some storekeepers made it through a secret passage in Honeydukes, with the help of a certain Harry Potter, who opted not to go back to safety with them, but go back and play the hero."

"Was not trying to play the hero!" Harry said resentfully, "I was trying to find Violet and Neville! I couldn't just leave them here."

But his dad merely smiled, proud of Harry's actions as well as worried for his safety. "Did you find her?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Are you sure she wasn't in the Hogwarts group?"

James nodded. "Minerva did a head count of everyone who came back, and Violet and Neville weren't there. Seems that very few made it back to Hogwarts in time –most were rounded up by the Dementors while they were fleeing. We still have to access the damage, but it could have been much worse if we hadn't had the warning –even as late as it was –and if you hadn't helped them find that passage."

Looking between both of his parents, Harry felt an odd sort of feeling in his stomach as both of his parents beamed at him, pride clearly presented in their faces. His parents have never looked at him in that way before –they never had the chance.

"We really should go look for Violet and Neville," Harry muttered quietly, feeling suddenly uncomfortable with this intense attachment he felt in that moment. He liked that they were proud of his actions today, what many others would call stupid, brash, Gryffindor behavior typical of James Potter's son. Usually Harry would brush that criticism off as a compliment, but it meant so much more when it was reflected in his dead parents' faces.

Your parents would be proud of you, Harry. People have said this a lot, but Harry had never really known what it meant, what it felt like to be proud of, to be loved unconditionally and wholeheartedly. He'd come close before, and he considered Ron, Hermione, and the Weasleys as family, but . . . never quite like this. Not by people who could be gone tomorrow, as cold and dead as they are warm and alive now.

Harry still didn't know where he was, or how they could be alive; all he knew was that they were, and he was not going to allow them to die again.

Neville felt cold. He didn't know how long he and Vi had been squatting there, waiting for the darkness to pass. A few minutes ago, he could have sworn he felt the Dementor's negative aura disappear, but he couldn't risk it. Neville refused to open his eyes, because if he did, he was sure he'd see his dead mother, crumpled on the ground, her beautiful, blank eyes staring at him.

It was his fault. He had to be the stupid Boy-Who-Lived, but even now, Neville couldn't understand why. He was weak; even he himself knew that. Neville just couldn't imagine why You-Know-Who would target him, mark him as his equal. To be honest, Neville secretly thought Harry should have this "honor", especially in light of the recent changes his personality had apparently gone through. Not that he was a bad guy before; he was nice, always trying to be friends with everyone.

Actually, Harry seemed to be a lot colder now; more distant. Neville didn't know what had happened to him to cause this change, but judging from his knowledge of spells, his leadership, and his pretty damn amazing Patronus, Harry should have been the one stuck with this Prophecy.

Neville felt a little bad for thinking it.

What would life have been like if Harry had been marked, instead of Neville? Would Neville have the perfect life Harry has, with both parents? Would Neville, too, have a sister like Violet?

No, he wouldn't want Harry to have his destiny. Not only was that an extremely selfish thought, but then Violet would never have existed, because Lily and James Potter would be dead.

He couldn't imagine a world where Violet didn't exist. She had been his good friend for such a long time –they were practically brother and sister. Harry too was almost like a brother, except that Neville has been pushing him away. He knew that it had confused Harry, and they eventually lost the closeness they once shared, but Neville had to protect him. There was no point in there being two eligible boys to be marked if the other was killed because of his association with the Chosen One.

Still, where does Harry get off accusing Neville of getting on with Violet? What about him and Ginny? Ron's been on his case ever since they started seeing each other, what sort of a hypocrite was Harry anyway? It's as if he'd never known the relationship the three of them had when they were little. Neville couldn't see how he could have forgotten, but he must have; Neville wouldn't do anything to hurt

Violet, and despite his anger about her current attitude towards him, her rejection hurt.

Bloody Dementors. Neville felt so bitter right now; it could only be their work. Finally, Neville gathered his courage and opened his eyes, only to wish he hadn't.

The Dementor was gone, but the girl remained. She was on her back, staring up blankly at the clear sky while Slytherin's scarf flopped around endlessly with the wind; the scarf had more life in it than she did.

Then Neville caught sight of Violet. She was staring at the girl with empty, unblinking eyes. For a brief, terrifying moment, Neville wondered if the Dementor had taken her soul as well as the girl's, but was rewarded with her flinch at his touch when he put his hand on her shoulder.

He wanted to tell her that there was nothing they could have done, that if they tried to battle that Dementor, they too would become shells. But he couldn't find the words, which seems to be happening much more often nowadays. It's as if he'd forgotten how to communicate with people. Perhaps he'd gotten too good at pushing them away.

"Helena," Violet whispered.

"What?"

"Helena Chambers. That's her name."

"Don't you mean that was her name?"

Violet turned towards him, and Neville was relieved to see life sparked back in her eyes, despite the angry fire being directed towards him. "She's not dead –not yet," she snapped, looking as if she dearly wanted to hit him.

"Might as well be."

But his companion stood up suddenly, kicking a nearby cardboard box fiercely. "Because you wouldn't do anything about it!" she screamed at him.

"What the fuck was I supposed to do?" Neville yelled back, wondering where both Potters got the audacity to speak to him like this, "I don't know the damn Charm!"

Violet shook her head, angrily refusing to meet Neville's eyes. "You should have. You would've known it, if you hadn't walked out on Harry's tutoring lessons. Yeah, I know about them; pretty damn angry that Harry was willing to teach a wimp like you, but you should've stayed. You shouldn't have been so bloody selfish for once in your life. Look at her! Look at her, Neville! You've ruined that girl."

"Bollocks. Do I look like a Dementor to you, Violet?"

"You killed her by not doing anything."

"Neither did you!"

"You're older than me; Harry was going to teach you it."

Neville felt that scowl twisting his face, but he couldn't stop the words from spitting out of his mouth. "Well, hooray for Harry. Let's cheer for the real hero; doesn't matter if his life's perfect, if he's never suffered . . . you should know suffering better than anyone else, Violet. You're still fucked up –always will be."

Fury kindled in Violet's eyes as she stepped forward, each step deliberately dangerous. "At least I'm not the Ministry's pathetic little hound. How does it feel prancing about on their errands like a house-elf? 'Oh, Master Minister, I is happy to do things for thee!' I can imagine it now –groveling before him, shining his shoes . . . the possibilities are endless."

Why is it about Potters that makes Neville furiously want to punch them? Violet's a girl, she's a girl, I can't hit girls, Neville thought to himself repeatedly, cringing at the thought of what Mr. and Mrs.

Potter would do if they found out he'd hit their daughter –or worse, what Gran would say if she knew he'd hit a girl.

But he couldn't keep the bitter words from tumbling out of his mouth. "Maybe I'm the Minister's dog –but you may as well be a Death Eater. Don't think I don't remember those books you were using for 'school research'. Absolute bollocks. Or your unusual liking of Dreamless Sleep Potions –junkie," he hissed.

Though these nasty words were the only things Neville allowed himself to retaliate with, Violet apparently had no qualms with hitting a boy, for her stinging slap onto Neville's face hit his left eye instead of his cheek. He recoiled from the force of the strong attack, but judging from the look on her face, she had been aiming for his eye.

However, instead of the anger he was expecting, he saw desolation in her eyes, blinking tears of betrayal away fiercely as she tried to hide how much that comment had hurt her. Neville immediately regretted his comment. Actually, he regretted speaking at all.

But before he could so much as apologize, Violet had pushed roughly past him and stood above the soulless little girl –Helena. After staring at her silently, as if imprinting the image of complete helplessness into her mind, Violet grabbed both of Helena's arms and pulled her up. Mechanically, the girl's feet synchronized with Violet's, allowing herself to be reluctantly led away.

He knew what he should do. He should go up on Helena's other side, silently help her back. But he didn't. All Neville did was watch Violet walk away from him, as many people have over the years. He should have helped, but he didn't, because he –he didn't even know what he was anymore, and he was sick of trying to be someone other than Neville. But he had to be –because it's his destiny, because the prophecy says he has to.

Neville remembered, more than a year ago, when Dumbledore had told him that the prophecy doesn't decide for him, that Neville had to decide for himself. Sorry Professor, Neville thought. He wasn't strong enough; destiny chose him, and all he can do is fulfill it.

Nevertheless, as he watched her go, Neville couldn't remember ever feeling as lonely as he did in that moment.

Neville stuck his hands in his pockets, having lost the nerve to actually follow the shrinking figures of Violet and the soulless Slytherin. Standing there, in the middle of a forlorn street still chipped with ice, Neville couldn't help but shiver with external and internal coldness, feeling more detached from the rest of the world than ever. His parents were gone, his Grams disapproved of his participation within the Ministry, Mr. and Mrs. Potter were equally disappointed, Harry was pushed away by Neville himself, and now Violet was walking away from him, angry and hurt.

Love, Dumbledore had said, Love was what saved you, and it is what will ultimately destroy Voldemort –for good.

Neville's lips twitched. Love indeed. He wasn't exactly the Golden Boy of Gryffindor, despite what the Daily Prophet liked to print. That title belonged to Harry –it always had. Harry was the one who was loved, and even now, when he had become so distant, still he made new friends, and kept his old. What was it about Harry that Neville didn't have?

Love. What an odd thing to be considered a trait. More of an emotion, a state of mind than a personality trait that apparently would allow Neville to kill Voldemort. But then, killing isn't exactly a lovely thing to do –or see, for that matter. Sometimes Neville wondered if he had it in him to kill. Because that was what was expected of him, wasn't it? Killing was supposed to split your soul . . . would Neville's be split, despite the good intentions and ultimately preferable outcome that would stem from Voldemort's demise?

Knowing his luck, probably. Wouldn't it be ironic if Neville turned out to be the next Dark Lord? Neville laughed out loud, even though it really wasn't funny at all. His own laughter echoed back towards him, reminding him just how alone he was. Nobody else to laugh with him, or smack him on the back of the head for thinking such dark thoughts.

How Neville wished he were ten and innocent. Well, not exactly. He was constantly hounded by Daily Prophet reporters and the Ministry and such, but ten was the last of those years, where he could have a

haven, shelter from the outside world. A place where he could just be a kid, just Neville.

Mr. and Mrs. Potter always welcomed him into their home for little play dates with Harry and Violet. At first, when they were really little, he and Harry would gang up on Violet, until one particular incident caused her to cry, getting them in trouble. After that, Harry became very protective of her, and they began including her in their little exploits, which included trying to find hidden treasure in the nooks and crannies of the Potter home.

Incidentally, they did find a nice stash of sweets, which was practically gold to them at that age. Neville realized now that Harry's parents must have noticed what they were doing and –to indulge in the Marauder spirit –hid those sweets for them to find.

Oh, the good old days when their only worry was to be careful in avoiding a stomachache from overindulging on sweets. They had even drawn up a fairly inaccurate and proportionally challenged map of the Potter home. Well, he supposed it was fairly good for kids.

Sitting down heavily on the slippery steps of a shop, Neville smiled sadly as he recalled the tears Violet shed as he and Harry left on the train to Hogwarts a whole year before she would. They had promised to write, and true to their word, they did, if infrequently.

But at Hogwarts, a rift came between their childhood memories as pressures and fame came between them, until Harry and Neville were naught but acquaintances. Oh, Harry had tried to keep their friendship intact, but Neville, for whatever reason, wasn't able to.

Maybe it was because he couldn't love. Maybe it was because he longed to go back to ten years old, but couldn't, and found himself caught between jealousy and unfulfilled wishes.

But he supposed it didn't matter now. He was seventeen bloody years old –an adult, not a child. An irrational surge of anger overwhelming him, Neville stood up suddenly, glaring at his surroundings, wondering how long he had been sitting here sulking.

Bother Violet. Typical that she'd just leave him here and not come back or send anyone.

"What do we have here?"

Neville jumped at the smooth, seductive voice off to his right, and immediately out as he cursed Violet over and over in his head for leaving him. Eyes fixated on the hooded figure in front of him, Neville took quick glances at his back warily, hoping she was the only one.

"Aww, is little Long-ass scared of a girl?" she cooed, an almost terrifying contrast to her chilling voice.

"Bellatrix Black," Neville said tersely. "Glad to see you made it out of the Department of Mysteries alive." Being able to throw sarcasm at the woman made Neville feel more confident. Last time he'd seen her, she had been dueling with Sirius Black, her cousin, but had to flee.

"Lost some good Dementors today," Bellatrix remarked, speaking as if they'd actually lost human beings anybody would care about losing. "Aurors came to the rescue of the poor, defenseless Boy-Who-Lived, eh?"

"What're you doing here?" Neville demanded, ignoring her last comment. "Aren't you afraid of the Dementors giving you one last Kiss? Bet they were pretty bloody eager to while you were in Azkaban."

The smile slid off of her face, but only for a moment. "If you believe yourself capable of trading insults with a Death Eater, then let's see your dueling skills, little Long-ass."

Neville nearly froze at this; he saw this coming, but wasn't prepared for it. He was an okay duelist, but nowhere near the levels of an experienced, Dark witch like Bellatrix. Nevertheless, he knew he had no choice.

However, the instant Neville hesitantly bowed, dangerous red sparks brushed past him dangerously and he was only able to dodge them out of pure reflex.

“You cheated!” Neville exclaimed, scrambling to his feet quickly.

Bellatrix smiled wickedly. “One thing you need to learn, boy –life isn’t full of pleasantries.”

Gritting his teeth, Neville stubbornly ignored the throbbing pain in his side from the hard contact with the ground. “Stupefy!”

But Bellatrix merely dodged the spell easily, laughing coldly at Neville’s attempts. “A Stunning Spell? That’s all the Chosen One has to offer? Rather half-arse attempt too. Your parents would be so proud, little Long-ass. Allow me to show you real magic –Novacula!”

“Protego!” However, Bellatrix’s streaking purple spell broke through Neville’s shield, slashing him deeply across his entire body with powerful force. Neville heard his back crack as he impacted the store window behind him, broken shards of glass flying everywhere as he landed in a heap on the unforgiving ground.

Neville cried out in pain as he tried to get up; glass had imbedded into the skin of his palm, as well as other places. My wand, my wand . . . he thought in panic, quickly searching for it. Unfortunately, what he found were two halves of his father’s wand, cracked by the fall.

A terrible coldness filled Neville as fear overcame him. He was going to die today . . . he was going to die at Bellatrix’s feet, unarmed and scared, a child. Then Voldemort would surely win, and everything would be lost.

But what really scared him was a very small sense of relief at this thought, knowing that the responsibility was no longer his. However, he wasn’t thinking about that as his survival instinct kicked in, picking up a shard of glass from the ground and crouching in the corner, waiting for that monster to come back in. Neville Longbottom was not going to go down without a fight.

“Running away, are we?” Bellatrix called as the deceptively friendly bell announced the opening of the door. “Cowards, like your parents?”

Or are you so weak that you've already expired? Personally, I'm betting on that one."

Talk all you want, bitch, Neville thought angrily, muscles tense as he waited for the opportune moment.

Once Bellatrix's shoe came into view, Neville vehemently plunged the glass into her foot, causing the woman to shriek in pain before he followed it up with a slash at her wand hand, her blood staining the shard. Bellatrix dropped her wand in surprise, giving Neville enough time to slam a fallen potted plant into her stomach, fleeing out the door as fast as his injured body allowed him.

"Neville!"

Turning around rapidly, Neville felt immeasurable relief when he recognized Mr. Potter and a group of Aurors running towards him.

"Bellatrix . . . Black . . . in . . . shop . . ." Neville panted, swaying slightly as he clasped a hand to his spinning head. Probably lost too much blood, he thought airily.

Mr. Potter nodded and gestured to the rest of the Aurors. "Go find her –and be careful."

As the rest of the Aurors sent precautionary Stunning Spells into the shop, Mr. Potter put a steadying hand on Neville's shoulder, leading him over to the next shop down, giving him the opportunity to sit down and rest, which Neville took gratefully.

"Sir!" One of the Aurors said, approaching them from the shop. "Black isn't there anymore –she must have Apparated when she heard us coming."

"What the hell was she doing here?" Mr. Potter wondered aloud. "No other Death Eaters were in the perimeter."

"Report back to Voldemort?"

Mr. Potter sighed. "We're going to have to assume that." He turned to Neville and asked, "What happened? And how bad are you hurt?"

Head still spinning, Neville explained as best he could about the Dementor sucking the soul out of the girl, how Violet had left, and described his fight with Bellatrix, the Dark spell she'd used, how he had been thrown through the window. Right as he mentioned this, Neville became all the more painfully aware of the sharp pain that still resonated in his whole body from that spell, like a persistent knife that wouldn't leave him alone.

"Is –is Violet okay? Did she get back alright?" Neville asked hesitantly, concerned about her against his will.

Mr. Potter nodded. "Yes, she made it back with the girl you described. Here, I'll heal some of the minor wounds." With non-verbal magic, Mr. Potter's wand glowed gold as slowly healed the cuts and bruises Neville had garnered, though the pain from Bellatrix's spell still remained.

"There might be internal bleeding," Mr. Potter explained, "so we'll have to have a Healer take a look at you; can you walk?"

Neville nodded. "I think so."

With Mr. Potter supporting him and a flank of Aurors on all sides, they made their way back to the main area. Though Neville was immensely relieved that it was over, he couldn't help but see her hooded eyes in every shadow, hear her cold, mocking laugh in every brush of wind, feel his body being crushed against the window with every step he took.

Neville shuddered as he noticed her blood on his hands. He felt so dirty in that moment, resolving to try and wash every stain of Bellatrix Black off of him . . . and ignore the nightmares that were sure to come from this truly horrible day.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Minister Scrimgeour looked up from his stack of paperwork, raising an eyebrow at who used to be one of the Aurors under his command.

Well, technically she still was, but he heard the whispers of those he used to work with; they found him changed, and so they should. This is war, and he had a broader group to supervise, lead through these dark times; and yes, his methods would have to change to accommodate this. Why couldn't they understand?

And here's a prime example: Lily Potter, one of his favorites. From his very first impression of the redhead, as one of her teachers in Auror Training, he had always known she'd make it as an Auror. Many underestimated her at first, but it soon became known that they had a very skilled fireball on their hands. And she hadn't lost that drive, not even after years in this tiring work.

Apparently, she hasn't lost her knack of yelling at people, either.

"Five students, Rufus! Five students! And three poor people living in the village who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not to mention Neville Longbottom being attacked by Bellatrix Black afterwards! Torturing Draco Malfoy –what were you thinking? He had valuable intel on upcoming attacks and you torture him?"

"You've never disagreed with it before, Lily," Scrimgeour said calmly. "And as you know –it frequently works. But you also cannot think that we aren't worried about Neville being attacked –but the boy is fine now, is he not? Able to hold his own until James got there."

Lily expelled a deep sigh of frustration. That woman never seemed to care that he was Minister; and to her, he was a person who needed to be scolded like a schoolboy. Rufus was a man of respect, and he required it from everyone he knew. Lily Potter, however, never seemed to get the message, and continued to treat him as she would any other Auror, whether above or below her rank. Yet this policy of equality –and respect to those she felt deserved it –was what endeared her to many.

"You know perfectly well that Neville is not fine. His father's wand broke, causing Augusta much distress, and he still feels lasting damage from that Dark spell Bellatrix used on him . . . not to mention psychological injury from the whole day! And this all could have been prevented if you had gotten the information some other way. Besides,

Malfoy is a minor; we can't bend the rules, not even for this. He was perfectly willing to tell me the information when I'd been kind to him after he got the shit kicked out of him."

"And yet he mysteriously disappeared, escaping the legendary Mad Eye, almost immediately after the matter had been dealt with?"

Lily fixed the Minister with a maternally stern glare, one that many would recognize from her Hogwarts days, though that particular expression had been reserved for James Potter and company back then. "Would you stay if the 'good guys' were breaking their own rules?"

"I'd like to think that I would have a better respect for authority than that, and refrain from becoming a Death Eater in the first place."

"Of course you would," Lily said, resuming her pacing. "But these people –they've never known anything else. As part of their 'pure' families completely fanatic about blood, young men and women like Draco Malfoy have been raised on that single principle –that Voldemort was right, that Muggleborns like me are to be exterminated. They're basically expected to be Voldemort supporters and the children of those in Voldemort's circle –like Lucius –are almost required to become Death Eaters. And as Slytherins at Hogwarts . . . they're prejudiced like no other."

"And why, pray tell, are you defending them when you yourself have been subjected to their prejudices?"

"Because they don't know any better," Lily said softly, "and we do."

Rufus wasn't sure how to respond to this.

"We're the good guys; if we don't hold the moral high ground, we're just as bad as them. And having two perfectly respectable Aurors torture a boy who should be in his seventh year at Hogwarts is failing this concept completely. You need to stop this, Rufus –it's up to you."

The Minister regarded his former pupil, carefully choosing his words. "Lily, I respect you. As an Auror, mother, and a human being in

general. But you couldn't possibly understand the position I'm in. Everyone is looking up to me to make the decisions. Fudge didn't do anything to stop Voldemort, and that's what I need to do. I'm doing something. You may not agree with my methods –and hell, it may be unethical –but at least it's something. Don't patronize me about morality and choosing the higher ground until you've actually been there, directing people, possibly to their deaths, making sacrifices. I know you and James have made many personal sacrifices, but you've never had to sacrifice someone else's life. Never had to tell someone's widow that their spouse isn't coming back. That they died for a noble cause."

Every line in Lily's face disagreed with his statement, and something burned in her eyes –knowledge. She knew something he didn't, and to be honest, Rufus didn't like it. He was aware that Dumbledore had some sort of secret army fighting against Voldemort as well, but he figured that they must have disbanded after the old man's death.

Maybe they weren't as dead as he thought. Watching Lily Potter, her defiant stance and blazing green eyes, Rufus wondered if she did know about sacrificing others, leading people to their deaths.

No, it couldn't be. Rufus brushed the thought away from his mind, thoroughly aware that people tend to be blind to things they don't want to see.

Transfiguration had never looked emptier.

McGonagall was teaching on, as usual, choosing to ignore the empty seats in various spots, vacancies that seemed to grow in number every day. People were scared; if they hadn't left after Dumbledore's death, the recent Dementor attack seemed to confirm that Hogwarts wasn't safe anymore from the raging war outside its walls.

A war that was slowly seeping through the castle's cracks, into the hearts and minds of its students and faculty.

However, even with all the chaos, life went on, and people were changing.

“Harry?”

Harry stopped at the sound of this uncertain voice. He debated with himself about whether or not to address this person, who had so vehemently rejected him when he was just trying to help him. “Yes, Neville?” he said finally.

Neville suddenly looked very awkward and small, a far cry from the arrogant prick Harry had seen during their one and only study session. Also, Violet’s increased iciness towards Neville implied that something had happened at Hogsmeade, something only the two of them know about. And, though Neville was a good friend in Harry’s world, he had to side with family on this one. His increasing lack of respect for this Neville didn’t really help the matter either.

“I –I was just wondering if you could teach me the Patronus,” Neville blurted out, looking extremely uncomfortable with asking Harry for help.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Were you not there last time?”

“Of course I was,” Neville snapped defensively. “I’m not stupid.”

“Never said you were.” Though I was thinking it.

Silence elapsed between them for a moment, and for a moment Harry thought Neville might lose his nerve and stalk off. However, the Boy-Who-Lived surprised him by extending his hand towards Harry. “Listen, I don’t want to row. Hal –Halloween . . . I could have helped, but I didn’t, and because of that, somebody got hurt. So could you just teach me the damn spell?”

Not exactly the nicest or most eloquent proposal, but it must mean something that Neville came up to Harry out of his own free will to ask for help.

“Wanna give me some specifics?” Harry asked. He had an inkling about what Neville was referring to; when they had found Violet, another girl was in her company –one with soulless eyes. All she said on the matter was that a Dementor had taken her soul. However,

judging by the haunted, helpless look in Violet's eyes, there was much more to it. Not to mention his dad bringing Neville back to Hogwarts in pretty bad shape; he refused to say anything about it though, saying it was Neville's business.

Harry was determined to find out what exactly transpired. That, and he knew he couldn't refuse if someone came to ask for his help.

Harry sighed in resignation. "Alright, Neville. We'll give the Patronus another shot."

"Can we come too?"

"What?" Harry asked, jumping in surprise at the two Weasleys approaching out of nowhere.

Ginny caught Harry's eye, looking very serious. "We want to learn that Charm; back there, during Halloween, we couldn't do anything to help, and I . . . I don't like feeling that helpless."

But Harry broke eye contact with her, scanning the room until they landed on Ron. Why would Ron willingly put himself –and his sister – in the same room with Harry, if he hated him so much? However, Harry was proved wrong when Ron inclined his head towards his best mate, never saying anything about how close he and Ginny were standing. Could Ron have gained some respect for Harry, enough for him to approve of their relationship?

"O –okay," Harry stuttered, taken aback at Ron's change of heart. It looked like Halloween did more than drive students away.

"It could be a bit like a Defense Club," Ginny suggested, grinning mischievously, "or we could pretend like Ron is taking Remedial Defense, and needed all of us to help him."

"Uncalled for!" Ron grumbled, looking put off.

"But it's so fun to take the mickey out of you, Ron," Harry laughed, getting caught up in the moment of friendly bickering foreign to this world's Ron.

Ron did look slightly surprised at the ease in which Harry was speaking with him. But the puzzled expression slid off his face and a grin took its place. "You're one to talk, Potter –Remedial Potions, anyone?"

"I'll have you know that I'm in N.E.W.T. Potions—unless you were too blind to see we were in the same class for three months?"

"Blind as a Bludger, Wood used to say," Ron said reminiscently.

Harry frowned. "You weren't on the team when Wood was captain."

"I bloody well was!" Ron replied indignantly. "On reserve, but Wood let me practice during his last year here, prepare me for when he was gone and all. That Bludger must have hit you hard last year for you to forget that."

"Oh . . . right. It did. Almost went nutters," Harry joked, covering up for his slip. Damn similarities almost convinced him that this was his Ron.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I think Harry's head is thick enough to withstand a measly little smack from a Bludger."

"Speaking of, we never actually got the Slytherins back for that offense, did we?" Ron remarked, apparently taking Harry's lead and speaking very casually for someone who had been insulting and badgering Harry for the past three months.

Harry shrugged. Tormenting Slytherins wasn't exactly high on his list of priorities at the moment. "It's ancient history. Never mind revenge."

With the topic dismissed, Harry finally noticed Neville, who had been standing there awkwardly, listening to their light conversation, torn between leaving and joining in. He looked so much like the Neville Harry knew that he couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for him.

"What day would be good for you –for the lessons, I mean?" he asked.

Neville gave a start, looking surprised at the sudden shift of attention to him. “Oh, er . . . I dunno. Any day I guess.”

“Nightly lessons are probably too hard, with homework and all . . . does every other day sound good to you lot?” Harry asked, addressing everyone this time.

Ginny glanced at her brother before turning back to Harry. “Fine with me.”

Both Neville and Ron echoed her sentiments, Ron adding that they could start tonight.

“Wait –how are you going to nick a Dementor?” Ginny asked curiously. “It’s not like we can just bring one into the castle.”

But Harry already had an answer to that. “Boggarts. There’s plenty – Tonks or Professor McGonagall should be able to get one for me. My boggart is a Dementor so . . . I suppose I’ll have to stay in its sight so it won’t change. We’ve got Defense next, so I’ll ask Tonks then and let you know when and where.”

Everyone nodded in affirmation before parting ways, both anticipating and dreading the coming night.

Over the next five weeks or so, they had a generally erratic schedule regarding Harry’s lessons. Harry had forgotten about Quidditch, Head Boy duties, and the other commitments the others might have, so they weren’t able to meet every other day, and were lucky if they could even find time twice a week. Especially so with the seventh years, whose N.E.W.T. classes became increasingly harder, and the school’s generally low morale due to its decreased number and the concerns about the dangers of the war raging outside Hogwarts’s walls.

However, this somewhat reconstructed version of the D.A. did gain two new members sometime after the first meeting –Hermione and Violet.

Hermione, who had been one of the few older students who hadn’t been in Hogsmeade that Halloween day, was hesitant at first when

Harry first approached her with his invitation. Her excuse was that she'd already mastered the Patronus, but after some persuasion, relented and agreed to go. Hermione helped Harry out with teaching the others, since she was the only other person in their Defense class who could manage a Patronus. They'd moved on from Patroni a while ago, but Tonks was giving private lessons to anyone who wanted to master it.

However, despite the efforts of both Harry and Hermione, none of their students produced more than vague shapes. For the first couple of meetings they had a hard time keeping the Boggart from changing, but finally resolved it by having Harry meet it first, then back up and stand next to the person practicing. Sometimes it wouldn't work, and the Boggart would still change, so they would have to try again to keep it there. This made it hard to practice, but at least it was something.

Violet and Neville didn't exactly help matters either with their deliberate attempts to avoid each other in the small room, and quite frankly, it was starting to aggravate Harry. They were making the draining meetings tenser than they had to be, and everyone else felt uncomfortable with their animosity, to which none of them were quite sure of the exact source.

His sister actually approached him first before Harry could invite her, expressing a wish to learn how to prevent what happened to that Slytherin girl. She made slightly more progress than the rest, her Patronus possessing a bit more solid of a shape.

Neville, too, made a lot of progress, and it seemed to Harry that his magic was a lot more focused and powerful. Dad had told him that Neville's wand, which had originally been his father's, had snapped in half during the Halloween incident, so he had gotten a new one. Harry thought it was rather ironic that the exact same thing had happened to his Neville.

Tonight, however, big progress would be made, either with personal revelations or producing a corporeal Patronus.

“Bugger,” Harry muttered as the Boggart began to shift to a different form. “Honestly, wouldn’t it have learned by now that we want a Dementor?”

“Well, it’s pretty stupid, innit?” Ron pointed out, shrugging. “It’s okay though –not like my Patronus is going to show itself anytime soon.”

Harry shook his head. “Don’t worry, Ron –it will.” And it would. If Harry remembered correctly, Ron’s Patronus was a Jack Russell Terrier.

About to step forward to intercept the Boggart’s change, Harry stopped cold when the Boggart finished its change sooner than anticipated. Instead of a giant spider, Ginny Weasley’s crumpled form lay on the floor, the angles of her body broken and her slashed face barely recognizable.

Harry stared at Ginny’s face for a moment, not noticing the sudden cease of movement in the entire room. Those wounds looked familiar, if not more fatal . . .

Turning his head slowly, Harry saw Ron’s reaction to his Boggart’s form. They had never actually seen Ron’s Boggart, always managing to get it changed quickly back to a Dementor before the change could be complete. Even Ron seemed shocked that this was what he feared the most. His face deathly pale now, the redhead didn’t seem to be breathing.

“Ron?” Ginny said hesitantly. “What –”

But before she could finish her question, Ron had turned around and stalked off, flinging the door open in his wake. Ginny made to go after him, but Harry stopped her. “No –keep on practicing. I’ll go. Hermione?”

“Are you sure Harry?” Hermione squeaked, sounding very scared all of a sudden.

“They’re not going to attack you, Hermione,” Harry said exasperatedly. “I’m sure you can handle three people.”

Hermione looked put off at this snappish answer, but turned to continue coaching Violet nevertheless. Ginny looked as if she wanted to accompany Harry, and Neville sulked in the opposite corner of the room from Violet.

But Harry was gone before anyone could say a word.

Harry strained his ears once he closed the door behind him, and was rewarded with Ron's footprints off to the right. Clearly something was bothering him, especially if he shared the same Boggart as his mum. Determined to actually learn something about this place, Harry started off on a brisk walk, knowing he'd catch up with his best mate.

However, he didn't count on Ron quickening his stride once he heard footsteps behind him. Bloody hell, Ron, Harry cursed in his head as he sprinted down the hall after the redhead. Through long corridors and around sharp corners, Harry pursued him until finally screeching to a stop at a dead end, just a closed window and curtain. Peering suspiciously around, Harry tried to jog his memory; there must be some kind of secret passage or something here. But as far as Harry knew, there weren't.

A flash of movement in the corner of his eye gave Ron away.

"A curtain? I thought you were better at hiding than that," Harry commented lightly, turning around to face the sneakers that poked out of the long maroon drapes.

Reluctantly, Ron slid out of his hiding place, scowling deeply. "Didn't give me enough time," he muttered resentfully.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Didn't know we were playing hide-and-seek."

"Leave me alone, why don't you?"

"Why?"

"It's my business, not yours."

"If that Boggart is why you didn't want Ginny to date me, then it is my business."

"I'm not complaining now, you prat."

"But you were. Before."

"So?"

"So you were complaining."

"You're really thick."

"And you're a big complainer."

"Would you stop with the complainer bit?"

"But you're complaining now," Harry said, smirking. "You're complaining about me complaining about you complaining."

"That makes no sense at all."

"No, it doesn't."

"I don't like you. You're nosy. Nosy prat."

"Who's being repetitive now?"

"Shut up."

"If you tell me what that was all about."

Ron's face paled. "I don't need to tell you anything –I don't owe you."

"What about that punch? And the Dementor? Don't think I've forgotten that."

Ron hesitated, his expression hard. "My brother died, all right?" he said angrily. "He died sixth year, same night Dumbledore died. Fenrir

Greyback –you know, the werewolf that specializes in kids –attacked Bill, mauled and bit him. He was going to get married too, last summer. But he died.”

Harry felt a horrible pang of sorrow for Bill. How could he have died? Yeah, his wounds were gruesome but . . . he had survived. What would have changed that resulted in his death?

“Wh –what’s that got to do with me and Ginny?” he asked slowly, preferring not to think about Bill dying; Bill, whose wedding Harry will attend before he set off on the Horcrux Hunt.

“You Potters are really deep in the war,” Ron explained, turning his face away from Harry. “Always have been, even in the First War. Dad told me. Really close to Dumbledore, leaders in the Auror department and in the Order. Violet was the girl in the Chamber, possessed by You-Know-Who, and you –well, you can do a Patronus, and Malfoy’s your arch enemy or whatever. I just –I didn’t want Ginny to die, because of association with you.”

“Oh,” Harry said weakly. “That’s it?”

“And I thought you were a bit of a prat, but that might have been jealousy talking,” Ron added.

But then something else clicked in Harry’s mind. “Wait, did you say Violet was in the Chamber of Secrets?”

Ron turned back towards Harry, confused. “Duh. They tried to keep it quiet, but you know how gossip travels here. It was a big thing, with you figuring it out, Neville, the teachers, and the Aurors going down there to kill that snake thing.” He narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Don’t tell me you forgot all that.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Harry said quickly. “Only wondered how you knew so much.”

“Right,” Ron said, but he didn’t sound entirely convinced. “Well, now that you know . . . d’you mind not telling Ginny? I don’t want her to worry or anything.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“Get back to the lesson, then?”

“Alright.”

When the entered the classroom again, some issues resolved, the tutoring lesson was able to move more efficiently, though Ron said he didn’t feel up to having a go with the Boggart again, choosing instead to practice on his own, get his Patronus out without any threat.

Actually, considering what happened, Harry decided to forego using the Boggart for the night, instead focusing on his students producing a corporeal Patronus without a Dementor breathing down their necks.

As the unusually quiet lesson came to a close, everyone said their goodnights and walked out silently.

All except Neville.

“Harry?”

“Yeah,” he answered tiredly.

“Do –do you mind staying a bit longer? I think I’ve almost got it.”

Harry looked up at this, not feeling tired anymore. “You want another go at it? Okay.”

“Are you sure?” Neville asked hesitantly. He looked very small, as unconfident as his other self. “I mean –y’know, with a load of essays and all?”

Harry cut off his rambling. “Don’t worry about it; I’ve already finished all my work. D’you want it with a Dementor or without?”

Neville hesitated. “With?”

“You’ve got to be sure.”

"I want the Dementor."

"All right then," Harry said. "D'you want to discuss your memory with me?"

"Not really."

"Then you'd better hope it's strong enough, cause it doesn't seem to be working even without the Dementor . . ."

"It'll work."

Harry raised an eyebrow but shrugged it off. "If you insist."

Neville withdrew his wand, twirling it in between his fingers. "I haven't tried it with a Dementor using my new wand. I think it'll work this time."

Nodding, Harry opened the wardrobe with nonverbal magic, stepping forward to face the Dementor stonily. A rush of memories attacked his mind, but after many lessons of doing this, he was able to resist them without becoming overwhelmed or using a Patronus. It certainly helped that whoever was tackling the Dementor at the moment was usually quick about it.

But Neville had yet to make a move.

"Get on with it!" Harry shouted, taking slow, steady steps away from the advancing Dementor, cries of pain and horror echoing louder the longer Neville hesitated.

Risking the chance, Harry turned his head around towards Neville, deciding to drive the Dementor away himself if Neville was going to back out. The Boy-Who-Lived stood rigidly with his hand out, pale and shaking, eyes wide as shadows of something Harry hadn't witnessed danced in his eyes. Neville flinched horribly as a memory played out in his mind.

"Neville!" Harry shouted, trying one more time to spur him.

Neville's eyes suddenly focused again, determination set in his face. "Expecto Patronum!"

Something silver and solidblew past Harry, tackling the Dementor back into the wardrobe before turning back around for both Chosen Ones to get a good look at it.

Harry's eyes widened in recognition of this particular Patronus before, struck by the sheer hilarity and irony of it all, he began laughing uncontrollably. Neville himself seemed quite shocked and disappointed. He began mouthing silent words of horror as Harry laughed, but did manage to get his voice back eventually.

"A toad? All that suspense and my Patronus is a bloody toad!"

"Tre –Trevor!" Harry gasped in between bursts of laughter. Seems like Neville will never escape Trevor, no matter who was the Boy-Who-Lived. Except now his slippery, troublesome toad would actually be his guardian against the Dementors. How ironic was that?

Meanwhile, Neville looked quite depressed about this revelation. "Why couldn't I have a manly animal? Why'd it have to be a tiny amphibian?"

Laughter subsiding, Harry was finally able to form a coherent sentence. "Maybe it's your soul mate Neville," he sniggered, unable to resist poking fun at Neville.

"Ha-ha, bloody hilarious, you are," Neville growled. "At least mine's not a deer."

"Prongs could stomp yours flat," Harry retorted.

"You named your Patronus?"

"Course I did. Everyone does. It's a fashion trend," Harry answered sarcastically. He was about to finish off his sentence with Of course not, you prat, it's my dad, but caught himself just in time, realizing that as far as he knew, his dad was still an unregistered Animagus.

Neville raised an eyebrow, his lips twitching. "Why don't you name mine, then? Didn't you call it something?"

"Yeah –Trevor. Looks like a Trevor, doesn't it?"

"I suppose. If you noticed that sort of thing."

"Attacking my masculinity, are you?"

"You're the one who names Patroni."

"You didn't seem to object to it."

Neville finally cracked a smile; this was probably the most comfortable conversation he and Harry's ever had together –at least, since they started Hogwarts and went their separate ways.

Harry, on the other hand, was thinking of something else. This was an opportunity to learn more about the differences between his experience as the Boy-Who-Lived, and Neville's. Old, yellowed newspapers hadn't helped him at all, and it'd be too suspicious to ask his parents directly about events he should know about.

So he'd subtly ask the source, even if it did feel a bit like he was exploiting Neville.

"D'you remember second year, when Violet was taken into the Chamber of Secrets?" Harry asked, deciding it'd be safer to start with something factual.

Neville's smile dropped as his expression hardened. "What about it?" he asked warily.

"It's just that you guys are in a spat or something, and it's disrupting class. You saved her, yeah? So what happened to make you avoid her?"

"That has nothing to do with the Chamber," Neville noted in confusion, eyebrows furrowed.

"It has everything to do with the Chamber," Harry said, attempting to sound wise despite completely making it up as he went along. "Obviously your fight now is –er –some sort of manifestation of that . . . event," he finished lamely.

Neville looked at him as if he'd gone nutters. "Er –right. If you say so."

Harry mentally kicked himself. Maybe he wasn't as good at bullshitting things as he thought.

Sighing, he decided to just take the righteous route and be as honest and sincere as he possibly could. "Look, it really is disrupting, what with you two constantly glaring at each other when I'm bloody well trying to teach. Not to mention I've had to endure Violet's brooding ever since Halloween. What happened? And while we're at it, the past few years too."

Perhaps it wasn't the most subtle proposition, but whoever said Harry was particularly sly?

Well, the Sorting Hat, but that was an entirely different . . .

"Why don't you ask her?" Neville asked, interrupting Harry's musings.

"She's being pretty stubborn about not saying anything," Harry explained. "Kind of like someone I know." He stared pointedly at Neville.

"It's not my place," Neville responded stiffly. "If you want to know, she'll have to tell you herself."

Harry recognized the familiarity of his words. He had said that exact same thing to Ginny that Halloween day, and he supposed he could respect that. Didn't help him much in the finding out area, but maybe today wasn't the best day to do it. Not when he hasn't built much trust with Neville yet.

"Okay," he said, "Reckon it's getting a bit late; wanna head back now?"

“All right.”

They both walked back to Gryffindor Tower together in silence, losing the momentary spurt of comfortable conversation they had achieved earlier. Harry glanced at Neville, noticing how his shoulders were no longer held arrogantly high, but slumped, as if in shame.

He wasn't sure why, but he felt a rush of sympathy for this Neville, who had also become burdened with being the Boy-Who-Lived, and yet doesn't seem to be able to carry it. At least Harry had Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Remus, the Weasleys . . . all these people who cared about and loved him. From what he could see, all Neville had was his Grams and the Potters, but he didn't seem to have Harry's family anymore, not Violet since Halloween, and probably not Harry for a long time.

“What're you doing for Christmas?” Harry asked suddenly.

Neville looked up in surprise. “What? Er –not very Christmasy things. Grams is off somewhere, and I'm doing this Christmas Auction thing for the Ministry . . .”

“Doing what?” Harry asked, his tone almost challenging.

“Er –sitting there I guess. In the front, occasionally bid. The Ministry said they'd pay for anything I bid for. But I don't think I will –doesn't look very interesting.”

“Why don't you come spend Christmas with us?”

Neville blinked. “What?”

“With us. Me, Violet, my mum and dad. It'll be fun, loads better than what the Ministry wants you to do.”

“But –but I told the Minister that I was going –”

“But not how long. Pop in, show your face, pop out.”

Neville hesitated, but there was a hopeful longing in his eyes that showed just how much he wanted to have a real Christmas with a family. And really, Harry thought, it'll be my first Christmas with my family; why not share it together? After all, Harry knew exactly how it felt to be shunted aside, to never fully appreciate the holiday. Ten years with the Dursleys made sure of that.

"I'll check," Neville said finally, "and you'd better ask your mum and dad. Don't want to just appear and ruin your holiday."

"I will, but make sure you can come!"

"Okay," Neville said, smiling genuinely. "Maybe your mum will hide the presents from us and send us on a treasure hunt for them, like she did when we were little."

Harry was at a loss for words, because he had no memory of that game.

Draco Malfoy eyed the room he'd been locked in with distaste. It wasn't a horrible room, per se –it just reminded him of home, and what he'd lost since he joined the Death Eaters. Actually, he supposed that it was destined to be lost ever since his father joined the ranks of the Dark Lord. Now, the Malfoy heir found himself trapped in Dumbledore's headquarters, where the top members were no doubt discussing his fate below.

He didn't like this feeling of helplessness, of having his life determined by others. Draco Malfoy, as a rule, made it a point to make people listen to him, whether it'd be by fear, cruelty, or respect. Normally it'd be fear or respect ever since he'd been branded with the Dark Mark, but he couldn't help but feel more alienated than ever. Whose side was he on? Nobody's. He was on his side, and his side alone, because really, when it came down to it, Draco couldn't trust anybody.

The Dark Lord was nutters, and the Ministry didn't follow its own rules. He needed to find a median, some sort of middle ground that followed a moral code and weren't fanatics. He wanted a side that would follow its own rules, even when it concerned a snarky Death Eater.

Draco owed Lily Potter for saving him; he had to admit that back when he was a naïve Hogwarts student, he would have been disgusted at the thought that he'd ever owe a Mudblood but –no disgust here, only gratefulness.

Quite frankly, Draco was overjoyed that he was even alive at all; he knew better than anyone that his broken body couldn't have held up under any more abuse, and if Lily Potter had come in perhaps a half hour –maybe even precious minutes later –Draco would have been dead, and too late to help.

Normally he would be resentful of any help offered to him, like when Snape tried to help him kill Dumbledore, but really, Draco would prefer to be alive than dead. And though he didn't like to admit it, he did feel guilty about Dumbledore's death. He hadn't actually caused the green light that killed the Headmaster, but he brought in the people who did it, and from what he heard, also killed several of Dumbledore's people in the process, including the oldest Weasley.

Blood traitor, Draco thought half-heartedly. But he couldn't put any real energy into it. Weasley was dead; what right did Draco have to further curse his memory? It's not like he could do anything from the grave . . . well, unless the Dark Lord made him an Inferi, but that was unlikely. Surely the Order would have buried him somewhere protected.

Draco's eyes scanned the room suspiciously, searching for any spelled traps. As his eyes trailed the dusty embellishing on the mirror frame, he decided that this room hasn't been used in a very long time. Actually, Draco thought, wrinkling his nose in disgust, Everything in this room is dusty. Nice accommodations.

Sure enough, when he picked up the pillow and threw it back on the bed, a cloud of dust swirled out, getting in Draco's face. Coughing out the dust and waving his hand around madly, Draco managed to clear the air a bit.

"Oh well," Draco said aloud, "it's not as if I'm some sort of guest or something."

“Right you are, boy.”

Draco jumped involuntarily at the new voice; he hadn't even heard the door open. But there stood Mad-Eye Moody, his somewhat terrifying babysitter at the Ministry, while Lily Potter went to go save her two brats. He was also the Head of the Auror Department as well as a prominent leader in the Order; the whole time Draco was on his watch, Moody had glowered menacingly at him while he strapped Draco to a chair.

He scoffed at the memory. It wasn't like he was going to go anywhere. Where would he run?

“We're ready for you,” Moody said gruffly as he pushed the door wider, his abnormally large eye swirling in its socket.

Draco felt terrible unease watching that eye, but he suspected that the grizzled Auror already knew that, and was purposely causing Draco discomfort. So he silently walked past Moody, deliberately avoiding his eye, and followed him down the stairs to what appeared to be the kitchen.

Blinking fiercely in the brightly fluorescent kitchen lights, Draco was surprised to find the top members of the Order unmasked and in perfectly good view. Weren't they worried at all about security? Or maybe they didn't view Draco as enough of a threat that they really didn't care if he knew their identities or not.

That was insulting.

“What, no hiding in shadows?” Draco drawled sarcastically.

“I think that's your job, Malfoy,” Sirius Black retorted easily, casually leaning back in his chair.

“We could always Obliviate your memory if you're about to say anything that would risk the Order,” a deep voiced man warned.

Draco was confused. “Who am I going to say anything to?”

“Voldemort,” Professor Lupin said.

Draco flinched at the name, as well as a couple of people in the Order.

“I dunno about you, but I’m personally hoping I’ll never have to see that bastard again,” Draco said fiercely, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. What exactly was this about, if not to goad him for information?

“I’m glad you feel that way about him,” Lily Potter said slowly, “because we were wondering if you’d be willing to help in the fight.”

Draco’s stomach sank. He knew exactly what they wanted him to do now. “You –you want me to spy on the Dark Lord?” he asked incredulously. “That’s suicide!”

“Not if you’re good,” James Potter noted with a hint of bitterness in his voice.

“James,” Lily warned, giving her husband a silencing glance. “Draco, you could be a double agent.”

“You mean like Snape was?”

“Yes, but without the betrayal,” Lily said quietly. “I won’t lie to you; it’s a big risk. But with Snape . . . gone, we haven’t got that much information on attacks beforehand. But if you can manage it, if you’re willing to, it’ll be a great help for our cause, in taking down that ‘bastard’. That’s one option. If you opt not to, we can relocate you to somewhere safe, away from the war, and Oblivate your memory of this meeting and everyone here. And it’ll be a very strong, deep obliviation to prevent anyone from extracting those memories from you.”

Sirius uncrossed his arms. “If you chose to become a spy for us, then you’ll be attached with a spell that will kill you if you are about to reveal anything about the Order.”

“Is that possible?” Draco said weakly. Seems like either way he’d have a big possibility of being killed.

“It’s a new spell, designed to prevent past mistakes,” Professor Lupin said quietly.

“If –if I go into hiding,” Draco said hesitantly, “can I take my mother and father with me?”

Several people looked surprised at his request, almost as if they expected him to be selfish and go it alone. “Maybe your mum, but as for Lucius Malfoy . . .” James Potter trailed off.

“Don’t think he’d take our help, even if we did offer it, boy,” Moody finished gruffly. “Best take what you’ve got and get out of the war while you can.”

“I can’t just leave them there!” Draco shouted, suddenly angry. What right did these people have to tell him to just abandon his mother and father? If it were anyone else, Draco would have no problem with this, but they were family, and you just don’t abandon family. Sometimes he didn’t like his father, but what teenager doesn’t? His mother had gone to Snape to get help, and he resented that, but she only did it because she didn’t want him to die.

In a way, his father made him join the Death Eaters in order to insure his survival in the new world the Dark Lord would build.

It wouldn’t be right to throw that all away and flee.

You’re nothing but a big BLOODY COWARD!

Potter’s words echoed in Draco’s mind as he recalled the iciness of that steel chair, the utter humiliation he felt when Potter dumped that bucket of water on him. He was not a coward . . . he was not! Why’d he even care what Potter thought anyway? It wasn’t as if Potter’s attempts at being a mini-Auror had any effect on him whatsoever.

Well, maybe it did a little.

Draco sighed heavily. Looks like he didn't have much of a choice. He couldn't just leave his mother and father in the middle of things while he went into hiding alone.

Alone. It hit him very suddenly just how alone he was; no more Crabbe and Goyle, no more Slytherins crowding around him, no more mother and no more "daddy's money" to protect him anymore. He was really, truly, on his own.

And he would have to ensure his own survival in the new world – whichever it would be –on his own terms, without anyone's lending hand. For once in his life, Draco Malfoy would choose the hard road.

"Alright, I'll do it. I'll be your bloody spy."

Christmas holiday was looming closer while more and more students left, their parents dissatisfied with the security Hogwarts offered. Harry in particular felt that all the surprises there could possibly be had been exhausted, but he proved himself wrong as they neared the time when Neville would join the Potters for their Christmas holiday.

“Luna?” Harry asked incredulously as a familiar blonde passed by him in the corridor.

She paused at her name and turned around, chandelier earrings clinking at the movement.

“Who’re you?” she asked rudely.

Harry gaped at her; this couldn’t possibly be Luna! She had lost her airy manner, the radish earrings, everything that had made Luna uniquely herself. It was all gone now. How could this have happened? What possibly could have changed to make her so different?

Now that he thought about, he really hadn’t seen Luna at all in the four months he’d been at Hogwarts; her presence had been particularly missed during Quidditch matches, but since Zachariah Smith had been commenting, he had merely assumed that McGonagall wouldn’t give her that job anymore, even if her commentary last year was amusing.

“Er –Luna Lovegood, right? Harry Potter. I, er, read the Quibbler sometimes. Good stuff.”

Surprise flashed briefly in Luna’s eyes, but her expression quickly hardened. “It’s all nonsense; I’ve been trying to convince my dad to print something meaningful for once, like –hair products.”

Harry felt thrown off; immensely disturbed with Luna’s new personality. To be honest, he’d always believed Luna to be static, rarely fazed by the perceptions and judgments of others. What had happened to Luna to make her so superficial, so completely different from the girl who’d willingly risked her life in the Department of Mysteries the previous year?

Looking at the scowling girl in front of him, Harry realized the major difference between his Luna and this one –she wasn't sincere. Luna was brutally honest, a trait that Harry had admired in the end, though he had not when he'd first met her. Still, he hoped the real Luna was in there somewhere.

"Is that all you wanted to say to me?" Luna demanded. She paused, deliberately tossing her eccentric hair over her shoulder. Harry couldn't help but blanch, but he caught himself quickly as she walked away with a painful imitation of swinging hips.

"I was wondering if you'd like to join a Defense Club I've started," Harry blurted, remembering Luna's comment about how she had considered the D.A. to be "like having friends."

Suspicion flashed in Luna's misty eyes as she regarded Harry seriously for the first time. "What are you playing at? Going to steal my stuff, are you?"

"What? Why would I do that?"

"Because 'it's fun,'" Luna mimicked sarcastically, bitterness creeping into her voice. "Because stealing Loony Lovegood's things is just so ruddy amusing." Agitated now, Luna began fingering the air around her collarbone, as if reaching for a necklace of butterbeer caps that wasn't there.

So it was the same Luna, but a Luna who was sick and tired of being picked on and having her things stolen –one who had completely changed herself in order to fit in with the rest of the girls in her year. However, judging by the fierce glare she gave Harry, her attempts haven't been working.

"I wouldn't steal your things," Harry said, echoing his own words. "That's horrible that people do."

Luna's eyes widened in surprise. "So you –you want me to join your Defense club why?"

Harry shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. "I like the Quibbler, and I'd think you'd be a good help, knowing about Crumpled-Horned Snorkack and all."

"You know about the Crumpled-Horned Snorkack?" Luna asked eagerly, eyes lighting up. "Dad and I went on an expedition to find some, but couldn't find any. Could have sworn we saw one, though."

Harry smiled. That was more like it. Her voice wasn't as airy as it used to be, but he reasoned that she had become so used to being someone else that it would be impossible to instantly revert back.

"That's pretty cool," Harry said, grinning widely. "So, interested in the club?"

Luna beamed. "Definitely. When?"

Once Harry explained how the dates and times change frequently and told her when the next scheduled meeting was, she nodded and ran off, looking considerably happier than when Harry had encountered her just a few minutes ago.

"-and then the cauldron exploded in Seamus's face."

Hermione laughed. "Everything explodes in his face."

"True. But who knocked Professor Flitwick's ink bottle over with her over enthusiastic hand raising?"

Hermione blushed. "That was an accident."

Laughing, Harry slung his arm easily around his friend's shoulder. "D'you really think Seamus wants things to explode in his face? Imagine the long showers he takes because of all that soot; he hogs the loo and makes the rest of us wait."

But Hermione wasn't laughing. Her body suddenly stiffened, and she looked extremely uncomfortable with Harry's arm around her. Sensing her anxiety, Harry quickly slipped his arm off, frowning. They'd been getting on so well.

Hermione remained unusually quiet during the next few minutes of patrol. Normally they could patrol comfortably, talking about classes, homework, or discussing new spells for the D.A. to learn. But now she took furtive glances at Harry when she thought he wasn't looking, looking as if she wanted to say something but thought better of it.

"What is it, Hermione?"

She jumped at Harry's question, blushing furiously. "N –nothing," she said, turning away.

"Do you want this patrol to be awkward?"

"No," she said defiantly.

"Why won't you look at me?"

"It's –it's just not fair to Ginny!" she blurted out angrily.

"Ginny?" Harry frowned. "What's patrol got to do with Ginny?"

"This –all of this– touching, and everything. All of a sudden you started talking to me a lot; I mean, you did before, but you were so persistent –"

"You're rambling."

"-and I thought that maybe you needed my help on a homework assignment or something, but when you didn't, I –I dunno. But now your arm is around my shoulder like I mean something to you, and I just don't think that's very fair to Ginny, being your girlfriend and all."

Harry stared. "Am I to maintain a five feet distance from you at all times?"

"Don't be stupid," Hermione snapped. "I just don't want to be your girl on the side."

“G –girl on the side? What –what the bloody hell are you talking about?” He paused. “Wait, you don’t think I’m interested in you, right?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Thank you for informing me how undesirable I am, but yes. Why else would you have kept on talking to me, inviting me to the Defense Club and everything?”

“Because you’re my friend,” Harry exclaimed loudly, unable to believe that Hermione, who was usually more in tune with how people thought, couldn’t comprehend a boy actually wanting a friendship with her. “I would never use you! I –and I thought you were smart –”

“I am smart,” she snarled. “It’s all I have.”

Harry shook his head in disbelief. “You’ve got friends, Hermione; you’ve got kindness and brains and bravery –”

“I’m not very brave.”

“You’re in Gryffindor.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” she insisted. “Everyone knows I should be in Ravenclaw.”

But she was brave. Even after nearly being killed by a troll, she still accompanied Harry and Ron to retrieve the Sorcerer’s Stone, figuring out that Potions riddle. She endured insults hurled her way about being a “Mudblood,” figured out what was Petrifying the students, punched Malfoy, stood in the room with a supposed murderer, stood in front of Harry while exclaiming that Sirius would have to kill them too if he were to kill Harry. She wasn’t in the graveyard with him the night Voldemort returned, but she was the one who’d caught Rita Skeeter, and blackmailed her. She was there in the Department of Mysteries, fighting for her life and nearly dying in the process. Hermione was the one who pushed Harry to extract information about Horcruxes from Slughorn when he himself became distracted.

She was brave; she just didn’t know it yet.

"You know," Harry said, "it's possible for people to like your company. I do."

Hermione bit her lip, a habit her counterpart didn't share. "So you're not trying to cheat on Ginny?"

"Of course not."

"Sorry for accusing you, then," Hermione mumbled, looking down in shame.

"It's alright," he said, waving it aside, "Glad you're so concerned about Ginny, I guess."

Hermione smiled, but for a while they continued to walk in silence until she said, "So, what spells do you think we should tackle now that everyone's got the hang of the Patronus?"

"Simple spells first," Harry said, recalling how they'd done it in the original D.A. "You'd be surprised how many people can't produce a Shield Charm properly. Maybe do a quick review on Patroni every lesson, you know, just have them summon theirs once."

After that conversation suddenly came as easily as it did before, and Harry was able to relax into the comforts of friendship, while Hermione continued to be in a constant state of shock as it finally registered that she had a real friend on her hands.

"I still cannot believe you invited him to spend the holidays with us," Violet grumbled. "Couldn't you have at least given me some advance warning?"

"What would you have done if I did?"

"Sulk."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Try to play nice, okay?"

"I'll be nice if he will."

Harry's eyes darkened, remembering saying something similar third year, when he was told to be civil to Aunt Marge. Didn't really work though, considering he blew her up into a human balloon.

"Just don't ruin Christmas for him." And me.

Violet seemed to recognize the way his sentence hung off, as if he wanted to say something more. She scrutinized him for a moment, but shrugged it off. "I suppose I can resist brooding the whole holiday. But don't blame me if I become excessively, unmanageably cheerful," she warned.

He grinned. "Rather a cheerful Violet than an evil one, I'd say."

Scoffing indignantly, Violet punched her brother's arm. "Evil? You're one to talk. Don't think I don't remember when you used to pick on me, before you got all protective and shit."

In answer, Harry merely waved his hand around, dismissing a topic he knew nothing about. To try and discuss it would be entering dangerous territory.

"Besides," Harry said, "he's not even spending the whole holiday with us –just Christmas Eve and Day. Shouldn't be too much torture, right?"

"If you say so."

Harry sighed, stepped off the Hogwarts Express and onto a Platform Nine and Three Quarters littered with parents and relatives searching for their children. As Head Boy, Harry's duty was to stay behind until every single student left with somebody, so he took his time scanning the crowd for his own parents.

Sure enough, his mother's bright red hair stood out prominently among the rest.

"Hey Mum," Harry said, placing his trunk in front of her.

Lily Potter arched an eyebrow. "Do you expect me to carry that for you? Is it necessary to go over the 'I'm a mother, not a house-elf' rule?"

Harry grinned. "Course not, Mum. Only want you to shine it up a bit. A Head Boy needs to have shiny luggage."

Violet coughed. "Proper boys aren't supposed to care about shiny things," she teased. "That's a girl obsession."

"Treasure," Harry pointed out. "Pirate gold. We like that."

"Boys just like the adventure bit."

"I dunno; getting a load of gold is definitely a perk."

A familiar laugh came off to Harry's right. Grinning, he turned around to find his dad just walking up, Sirius right on his heels.

"We're all here? Good, let's go," James said, turning around again.

"I actually have to wait until everyone leaves, then check the train to make sure there's no stragglers," Harry explained apologetically.

Judging by what Harry had seen in Snape's Pensive fifth year, and despite having lived with his father for two months, he had expected James to be severely displeased with having to wait before going home. However, like everything these days, Dad surprised him.

"Alright, give me your trunk, then. Might as well get everything ready. D'you want us to come back and wait here with you or are you okay?" He took the trunk from Harry's shocked fingertips.

"Er –no?"

James chuckled. "Guess it's wait in the car, then."

Oh yeah. Harry had forgotten that the Potters had a car. It was a fancy one too; if he remembered correctly, it was a better model than

Uncle Vernon's, and that's saying something, considering the pride his uncle took in his car.

"Harry!" Hermione called, walking briskly towards them. "C'mon, everyone's gone. We need to check the train, remember?"

Blinking, Harry glanced around the Platform. Everyone was gone. "That was quick," he remarked, eyebrows knitted together. But then he remembered that Hogwarts' numbers have dwindled considerably ever since Halloween, and that a lot of students had gone home early in order to avoid a potential attack on the Express.

After a quick sweep down the train, magically opening each compartment, Harry and Hermione confirmed to the Conductor that the Express was completely empty. With a parting wave, the Hogwarts Express sped away in a trail of smoke. Together, the Heads watched it go until it went around the bend, out of sight.

"So," Harry said, "have a good holiday, Hermione. Happy Christmas."

Hermione smiled genuinely. "Happy Christmas to you too Harry," she said, before doing something completely unexpected. Tentatively wrapping her arms around him, Hermione awkwardly gave him a hug. Surprised, Harry stood stiffly for a moment, but eventually relaxed into it, irrationally happy that Hermione was finally comfortable with their friendship.

Well, maybe not completely, but it was a start.

"See you at the start of term," Hermione said, smiling through her embarrassment at her show of affection.

"Yeah, see you."

With one last goodbye, they stepped through the barrier together, parting ways between the wizarding and Muggle worlds.

Dad stood, arms crossed, leaning against a pole. His eyes immediately brightened at the sight of his son as he pushed his weight off the pole and waited for Harry to match his stride. "So that's

the Head Girl, eh?” James said, watching Hermione walk away with her family. “A Muggle-born, I’m assuming?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

James’s eyes glinted mischievously. “Your mother was a Muggle-born Head Girl in our day, you know. She was forced to spend a lot of time with me, but I know she liked it.” He winked playfully. “Any romantic tension between the current Heads?”

“Wh –what?” Harry asked incredulously. Why did everyone think he fancied Hermione? “She’s just a friend, that’s all.”

Laughing, James held up his hands in mock surrender. “It’s okay, no need to be defensive. Just wanted to check, make sure you weren’t off snogging on patrols when you were supposed to catch the other rule breakers.”

Harry snorted. “Like you and Mum were off chasing Sirius during patrols. Hold on, you weren’t snogging on patrols, were you?” Harry asked, horrified. He really didn’t want a mental picture of his parents snogging in a broom closet somewhere at Hogwarts.

“Of course we weren’t, being upstanding students at Hogwarts and all,” James said, grinning with a nostalgic, faraway air. “Although we did catch Sirius snogging some Hufflepuff on our first patrol –which I was late for– but it was completely unintentional. I remember blasting the door open when we heard some suspicious noises just to impress her. Imagine my surprise when we found my best mate.”

Harry had to laugh at that. It was nice to hear stories about a young, pre-Azkaban Sirius with laughing eyes and full skin, the boy he had been before Azkaban had made him bitterly broken. There were so many hints of that kid in the Sirius Harry had known, but he had been through so much, trials and suffering he didn’t deserve.

Thoroughly sobered now, Harry found that he couldn’t participate anymore in the conversation. They were nearing the Potters’ car now, to return back to the house he didn’t grow up in, to the family he never had. The people Sirius was thought to have betrayed, people

who knew that by Sirius's own words that he would rather die than betray his friends. His family.

Harry remembered his first and only Christmas with his Godfather. He'd celebrated Christmas with the Weasleys before, but Sirius was the closest thread he had to his parents, the lasting connection that severed that night in the Department of Mysteries. And even then, despite how much he cared about Professor Lupin, he'd never become as close to the werewolf as he had Sirius.

But now he knows why Lupin never kept in touch, and he can't really blame him. When he originally saw Sirius that first day here, he'd been shocked. Harry had relived the pain of losing Sirius the first time, but it was that hope –that immeasurable, irrational hope that killed him. Maybe when Remus saw him, he recognized that last link to his best friends, but knows that he cannot deceive himself into thinking that Harry was James, that everything would be the same again. He was just protecting himself from hope after thirteen years of loneliness and hardships unbroken by laughter, and Harry can't begrudge him that.

They both had hard lives, Sirius and Remus. Just that glimpse of them at Harry's seventeenth birthday celebration, before it went all wrong, was enough to see just how powerful the Marauders' friendship was, how they kept each other strong through difficulty. Remus and Sirius were the same fundamentally, but they looked happier. Sirius's skin was no longer sallow, and Remus had a few less gray hairs.

"You okay Harry?"

Harry jumped, snapping out of his thoughts. "Er –yeah. Sorry. Lost in my thoughts for a moment." Nervously, he glanced at his dad out of the corner of his eye, and saw James's eyebrows furrowed in something almost like suspicion.

No, it couldn't be. He was probably just imagining things; concern, that's what it was.

However, his momentary sense of unease completely evaporated as he stepped into the car, playfully pushing Violet to the other side of the car.

“Who died and made you king?” she grumbled sulkily.

“You were in my seat.”

“No I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were.”

“No I –”

“Do we need to strap you both to booster seats?” Lily asked sweetly.

“No,” they chimed.

“Then play nice, like the big mature kids you are,” James said, starting up the car.

Violet and Harry looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

“She’s short,” Harry pointed out, unable to resist the grin erupting on his face. This has certainly gotten him in a better mood. Who’d have thought arguing would be a good source of therapy?

Violet stuck her tongue out at Harry. “At least I’m not an immature prat.”

Harry rolled his eyes. This was going to be a long ride.

“Where are we?”

Violet poked the side of Harry’s head, as if searching for a missing brain. “Where we go every year, idiot –to get a Christmas tree. Better get a decent one this year though. You picked one that was cursed to throw pinecones at anyone who tried to hang ornaments on it.”

“Oh. Well –er –how was I supposed to know it was cursed?”

“When you find one you like, try to sense if there’s any magical residue,” Lily explained. “Then we can turn it over to Arthur, let him know people are enchanting Muggle Christmas trees.”

“Right.”

Lily sighed. “Just find a tree that isn’t dead, and we’ll take a look at it.”

And so the search began. Unfortunately, Harry had never gone tree hunting before, so he had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to be looking for, and whatever he did suggest always seemed to have something wrong with it.

“This one?” Harry asked tiredly, pointing to a perfectly green tree.

Violet took one glance at it. “Looks grassy. What’s wrong with you Harry? You know we’re looking for a deep forest green.”

Harry wanted to tear his hair out. How was he supposed to tell the difference between grass green and “deep forest green”? He didn’t normally notice those kinds of things.

“Not that one, either, it’s too teal –”

“For Merlin’s sake, Vi, I can’t tell the difference!”

Violet frowned. “You’re usually much better at picking out the healthy, green ones than I am. Did you suddenly go colorblind?”

“Yes, that’s it. I’m colorblind,” Harry groaned. “Can we go now?”

“But you’ve liked picking out Christmas trees ever since you discovered that you could pull the branches to dump snow on my head,” Violet pointed out, but now her teasing sounded forced.

“I would never do that,” Harry said carefully, watching her reaction.

Violet blinked in surprise. “You’re right,” she mused, “you wouldn’t. Way too damn protective.”

Harry breathed out a sigh of relief. Looks like he passed the test.

“Vi! Harry! I think we’ve found one!”

Violet’s face lit up as she eagerly ran towards their parents, dragging Harry by the arm. Fake snow crunched underneath their feet as the Potters’ yearly Christmastime ritual slowly came to an end.

“I think this is it. Healthy, strong,” James said, ticking off his fingers with each word, “nimble, not too much shedding, tall, manageable, green –”

“Forest green,” Lily coughed.

“Forest green,” James corrected himself, grinning. “And no magical residue whatsoever.”

“James!” Lily exclaimed, slapping her husband’s arm. “Not in public, please. Do you want to be personally responsible for the renewing of the witch trials?”

“To be honest, I’m more scared of you than I am of them.”

“C’mon toerag,” Lily said affectionately, slipping her arm through his. “Let’s get this Christmas thing up and running.”

Harry and Violet looked at each other, identical grins plastered to their faces, and gagged.

Soon, right after they had purchased the tree and brought it home, the decorating process began. They formed a Potter assembly line with Lily opening up the dusty boxes, handing each individual box to James, who gave them to Harry and Violet. Then they would open the boxes with their names on it and take their turn putting up their personal ornaments.

It was a very interesting experience to put up seventeen years worth of memories up on one tangible media, especially to someone who had no idea what each ornament was supposed to mean, though they must have some kind of sentimental quality to them.

The first one Harry picked up was clear enough –Baby's First Christmas. Harry smiled at the figurine, a baby bear ridding merrily on a rocking horse. Innocence. He'd never had any ornaments to claim as his own at the Dursleys, but they did have a Christmas tree ritual similar to this that Harry wasn't allowed to participate in, not truly. At the Dursleys, Harry had been demoted to the box opener, and when they were really young Dudley would try to reach up on the tips of his toes to carefully put up each ornament. As they grew older, however, Dudley began hanging the ornaments on Harry, trying to stab the hooks into him instead of onto the tree. But finally, as the teenage years rolled by, Dudley refused to participate in such a childish game, and the ritual ceased.

Nowadays, Aunt Petunia hung the ornaments alone, long slender fingers lingering on each ornament as it evoked memories long lost in the past, with green light and darkness.

Harry remembered watching her one night, as he snuck out of his cupboard to grab some food when he thought everybody was asleep. He'd almost died of a heart attack when he heard noises in the family room, but nervously peeked around the corner to check it out anyway. Harry closed his eyes and remembered the distinct smell of pine, the constantly simmering kitchen. His mind's memory recalled the soft, painful sound of Aunt Petunia's choked sobs.

Ten and lonely, Harry had been surprised to find his normally frightening, cold Aunt with her legs collapsed on the floor, clutching something to her flat chest. Knowing Aunt Petunia, with her almost fanatic obsession with normality, weakness seemed to fall into the category of things she hated as much as she hated Harry.

Snapping himself out of his musings, Harry realized with sudden clarity that Aunt Petunia and Remus Lupin may have something in common. The iciness and unloving environment Aunt Petunia had provided for him had been done out of love –but out of love for her sister. Perhaps it was too painful to look at her nephew, see the man she regarded as having taken her sister away from her, from anything a Muggle could understand. Lily Evans, in Aunt Petunia's perspective, had been whisked away into a fantasy that she couldn't reach,

something so intangible that she began distancing herself away so she wouldn't feel lonely and abandoned.

Harry was the product of that abandonment, and perhaps looking into his eyes –Lily's eyes– was too painful, because then Aunt Petunia would have to admit to the very thing she had been fiercely denying for ten years; she had a sister, and she was dead. Aunt Petunia could no longer hide under the façade that she didn't care, so instead she turned to hatred, convinced herself that she hated her stray sister, wanted nothing to do with her.

But that night, when Harry became the only witness to a very private moment, he saw that she really did love her sister. Because Harry had watched carefully to see where Aunt Petunia placed that ornament, determined to see what it was that had made his aunt seem so human.

So, the next morning as the Dursleys were fast asleep in their beds, Harry had crept out of his cupboard for the second time, reaching deep behind the Christmas tree for the ornament hidden out of sight. Bristles brushed against Harry's cheek painfully and knocked his glasses askew, but that hadn't deterred him. Finally, his fingers grazed cool ceramic as he carefully unhooked the ornament, making sure he remembered exactly where Aunt Petunia had originally placed it.

In his scrawny ten-year-old hands, Harry had held what was possibly the only trace of Lily Evans-Potter that Aunt Petunia had dared to keep. It was a simple white ornament ball, but it was decorated in such a way that made Harry unconsciously copy his aunt, gently brushing his fingers against the childish stick figures drawn onto the ball, like a memory etched into the mind.

A redheaded stick-Lily had her arm around a taller Petunia, both with large smiles that took up their whole faces. In a child's scrawl, it read Happy Christmas Petunia, the Bestest Sister Ever!

He wasn't sure what possessed him, but Harry turned around to look at his mum, only to find another deceptively ordinary ornament ball in

her hands. She was looking at the innocent image with the same deep sadness Aunt Petunia had looked at it seven years ago.

Carefully, Lily stretched up so that the ornament was high up, in full view of everyone. Harry got a good look at it, and realized that on this particular ornament, the lines of the drawing were cleaner, the handwriting more controlled and mature.

From Petunia to Lily: Sisters Now and Forever.

Neville was bored. A minute more of this and he was going to croak and die where he sat. It's not even a comfortable chair, he grumbled to himself, You'd think that, as a "special guest," I'd at least have a chair that doesn't stick me in the arse. He froze, reminded of Bellatrix Lestrange's jeers and he immediately turned his attention back to the current item being auctioned off.

"The first –the first, I tell you witches and wizards– magic carpet ever made in the whole of Britain. It doesn't work anymore, but it makes an excellent coffee table rug. Pretty, intricate details, charm the robes off your in-laws when you sit them down. They'll even be too absorbed with it to notice that you've spilled your tea all over yourself! Bidding starts at fifty galleons. Any takers?"

Neville yawned. It probably wasn't even authentic at all; wouldn't it be more careworn if it were? He had come with the intent of buying the first thing that had interested him and bolting out of there, but so far he'd found nothing and had suddenly felt horrible about his plan when he'd seen the Minister, who'd thanked him heartily for coming.

Why was he such a pushover?

So here he was, bored out of his mind. Should he pretend to have gone mental so they would want him out of there? That probably wouldn't work.

Maybe Grams would like a new rug, especially the authentic first magic carpet. Neville raised his number to put up his bid.

"We have one!" the auctioneer announced loudly, sounding relieved that someone was bidding. "Any contenders?"

A couple of people bid after that, but Neville was determined to buy his one item and hurry to the Potters' Christmas dinner. Eventually, his bidding rivals ceased, leaving Neville –with the Ministry's money– victorious.

As soon as the auctioneer announced a break with refreshments, Neville sprang out of his seats towards the podium. "I'm leaving early," he said. "Can you Express Owl that magic carpet back to my house?"

"Of course," the auctioneer said pleasantly. "Happy Christmas."

"Don't you need to know my address?"

He waved that fact aside. "Don't worry, the Ministry gave me an address listing of everyone at this auction."

Neville beamed. That was nice of them to take care of that for him. However, just as he had been about to make his escape, the Minister limped into his path.

"Neville!" he called. "Leaving so soon? We've barely seen any of you."

Shifting his feet nervously, Neville found himself unable to look at the Minister in the eye. There was something incredibly intimidating about him even through the kindness. Neville had learned long ago that crossing the Minister was not a good idea.

"I –I've got a Christmas party to go to," he mumbled.

"I thought your Grams was busy."

"She is, but a –a friend invited me over. I bought something," Neville added hopefully, "that magic carpet."

The Minister nodded. "Good choice." He paused, looking thoughtful. "Can you manage to stick around a little longer?" he asked, eyes

glinting in a way that scared Neville. "I think there's a little item that might interest you."

"Soon?"

"Soon."

"What is it?"

"That'd be spoiling the surprise, wouldn't it?"

He had to admit, he was intrigued. "I guess I could wait a little before going to the Potters' –"

"Oh, so you're visiting Lily and James!" the Minister said loudly. "I thought so. Rather close to them, aren't you?"

"Not really. We used to be, but –"

"Yes, yes, I remember Lily talking about you and Harry going 'Marauding' around her house, back in the ancient days when I was Head of the Auror Department. I'm sure they'll understand, especially regarding this particular item and in the Christmas spirit . . ."

Now curiosity got the best of him, and Neville knew that he would torture himself wondering what exactly this item was if he didn't go back in that tedious auction room.

"It's coming up next, yeah?"

"I can move it up for you."

"That'd be great, thanks sir," Neville said politely, excusing himself back to the auction room, feeling the Minister's piercing gaze on his back the whole way.

Neville took his seat in the front again as the chatter began to die down. He nervously looked around, wishing they would hurry it up; he didn't want to be late for the Potters.

“We’re changing up our schedule a bit,” the auctioneer said, glancing at Neville with something akin to sympathy. “So next is this wonderful, moving photo album of who are arguably the most famous family in Britain. Spanning from their own childhood and teenage years until the very day they died, Alice and Frank Longbottom had left behind this memento of their lives, found in the ruins of the greatest victory and tragedy of this century.”

The whole room turned around to eagerly gawk at a sheet white Neville, his private emotions on display to everyone in the room. He stared in shock at the auctioneer, who was looking more apologetic every moment.

“Er –bidding starts at seventy-five galleons,” he announced weakly, looking torn.

But that got Neville’s brain moving again as shock was suddenly replaced with a much stronger emotion –anger. How –how dare the Minister do that to him? That album belonged to Neville, for his own private comfort, not for a bunch of bloody aristocrats to bid on it as if it meant nothing, had no sentimental value.

Neville’s hands aggressively shot in the air, angrier about this than anything else in the world. Little Long-ass, Bellatrix jeered at him in his mind, Running away, are we? Cowards, like your parents? Or are you so weak that you’ve already expired?

He wasn’t running away now. Neville was pissed, and nobody else was going to get their grimy hands on the very last thing he had of his parents, now that his father’s wand had snapped, also thanks to Bellatrix.

He was not to going to lose them again. Nobody else will flip through the album, watching a friendship turn into love, love solidify into marriage, and innocent, baby Neville playing around on the floor, hardly extraordinary and nobody’s hero.

“One hundred galleons,” Neville said violently, glaring around the room as he dared anyone else to try and match his bid. The room stared back at him, but nobody did anything, not even breathe.

“No other bids? Going, going . . . sold, to Mr. Longbottom for one hundred galleons.”

As soon as the album became officially his, Neville knew that he need not have worried. Every single pair of teary eyes in the room reassured him that nobody would have bid against him, even if he had only added one more Knut to the pot.

Neville stood up in his chair and walked over to the podium. “Would it be too much trouble if I got that album now?” he asked, pushing down the urge to turn around and hex the Minister.

“Of course not,” the auctioneer said kindly, handing it to him. “Happy Christmas.”

Neville could tell that he meant it, in the most heartfelt way.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely before turning on his heel. He had a Christmas party to get to. But once again, just as he closed the door to the auction room, the Minister got in his way.

“I know you’re upset Neville –”

“Piss off,” Neville hissed, surprising himself with his own daring. “That was low; this album should have been mine in the first place. Why haven’t I ever seen it?”

The Minister looked perfectly calm, a fact that infuriated him. “We were going to give it to you when you turned seventeen and officially inherited the remains of your parents’ items,” he explained slowly. “But we saw a political opportunity. The people are starting to doubt you, Neville; people like Rita Skeeter are out to ruin your reputation, everything we’ve carefully built. You may not have noticed, but believe me, we have. They think you’re just an unimpressive brat who hasn’t done anything to stop Voldemort.”

“So you put up my photo album for an auction and made sure I would come?” Neville asked skeptically. “How does that help my image?”

He sighed. "Didn't you see their faces? There wasn't a single dry-eyed or unmoved witch or wizard in that room, and we made sure to place many of the well known gossipers so they'll tell all their friends about it. Congratulations, Neville, you're back in the public's good grace. The sympathy card always works."

"So this –all of this– is all just a publicity stunt?"

"Politics is a dirty business, Neville; nobody's hands are clean of manipulation."

Neville stared. He couldn't believe this. "I can't –I don't know what to think. But I'm going to go enjoy my Christmas while it lasts," he said harshly, "so excuse me. I have a party to get to."

"Happy Christmas Neville," the Minister called at his back.

Reluctantly, Neville stopped at the Minister's almost commanding tone. "Happy Christmas, Minister Scrimgeour."

And then he was gone, swallowed in the shadows of the night, but the bright red family photo album remained in sight for a ways until it too disappeared.

"How was the auction, Neville?"

"Boring."

Harry grinned. "Buy anything?"

"Oh, yeah. The first ever authentic magic carpet, and...yeah." Neville suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"And what?" Harry pressed. "What's that in your hand?"

"Nothing, Harry," Neville snapped, looking as though he regretted coming now. "Just drop it."

Harry held his hands up in mock surrender. "Alright, Neville, calm down."

Neville's face relaxed, apologetic. "Sorry, Harry, didn't mean to snap –just been a tough night."

A familiar snort came off to their right, and both boys turned around to find Violet leaning against the stairs, an eyebrow raised. "Tough night? What'd you do, choke on caviar?"

"Violet!" Harry snapped, watching Neville's face flush in anger.

"I know, I'll be good," Violet responded, walking back to the kitchen.

"Sorry about her," Harry said. "She's –"

"A bitch?"

"Hey!"

"I'll be good," Neville said in a high pitched voice, imitating Violet. But he seemed to realize how ungrateful he was being and instantly looked ashamed. "Sorry –again. It really has been a tough night; I don't want to ruin your Christmas. But can you get Violet off my back please?"

"I'll try, but no guarantees."

The door bell rang again. "I got it!" Harry shouted, grinning as Sirius's head poked in the window, revealing their remaining guests. He eagerly swung the door open, greeting, "Happy Christmas Sirius, Remus."

"And a very Happy Christmas to you too," Sirius said cheerfully. "Where's your dad? PRONGS!"

Remus shook his head at Sirius's antics. "He's happy to see you too, Harry," he said, ruffling Harry's hair affectionately "Oh, hello Neville. James said you'd be joining us today."

"Happy Christmas Professor."

"I'm not your Professor anymore, like I've told you before."

Neville blinked. "What am I supposed to call you?"

The elder man laughed. "Remus, of course; not Mr. Lupin though – makes me feel old."

"But I can't call you Remus," Neville said, sounding scandalized. "My Grams would flay me alive."

Harry grinned as Remus laughed again. It was good to hear the werewolf laughing instead of staring into the fire solemnly.

"Call me Remus. We'll keep it a secret from your Grams."

Neville smiled uncertainly. "Er –okay."

"Don't worry, Neville, good 'ol Moony is good at keeping secrets," a new, familiar voice assured.

Harry spun around in alarm, staring into the face of the third member of the Marauder's party. Him, Harry thought in horror. No, he's not supposed to be here, he can't be here, he betrayed them –

"Hullo Harry," Peter Pettigrew said merrily. "Sorry I missed your birthday; the Ministry keeps us paper pushers busy, and they have the worst timing."

"Wh –what?" Harry stuttered, wanting nothing more than to rip the throat out of the man who'd sold Harry's parents to Voldemort. He should be a Death Eater, whimpering at Voldemort's side like the rat he is, not here all cheerful, about to celebrate Christmas with Harry's family.

Peter laughed nervously. "You alright?"

Suddenly Harry didn't feel so spirited. Wormtail was here, a firm reminder of the threat that Voldemort still poses to the world. His presence told Harry that things definitely weren't right; out of all the differences he's seen or heard about, Wormtail remaining an honorable member of the Marauders was what had completely

thrown Harry off, knowing that someone should be on the other side of the door, locked out, instead of welcomed in like family.

"I've got to go to the loo," Harry said quickly before making his escape.

"He's acting rather odd today," Peter said as Harry took a sharp turn in the corner, trying to put as much distance between him and Wormtail as humanly possible. He felt sick, like he wanted to throw up the world. How dare he, Harry thought angrily, How dare he still be here, talk to the people he would have betrayed? Why he hadn't Avada Kedavra'd Wormtail right there on the spot was a mystery to him.

Except that it would ruin everything. They trusted Wormtail, Harry and Violet's "uncle," and would die for him –Sirius had made that perfectly clear that full moon night in third year. And Harry already had that connection with Voldemort on his birthday, what they regarded as a seizure, and if he just attacked his uncle Harry would probably take the blame, since they don't think Wormtail did anything.

But he had to warn them somehow; he was the only one who knew that a Death Eater was in their house. Before he could think up a proper plan, Harry collided into his dad, sending both Potters sprawling on the ground.

"Enthusiastic for Christmas, eh?" James joked, running a hand through his hair. He picked himself up and offered a hand to Harry. "Where were you running to anyway?"

"To see you, actually." Harry sighed. Here goes nothing.

James crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. "About what?"

Harry hesitated. "It's about Wormtail."

James frowned. "When'd you start calling him that? It's always been 'Uncle Peter' since you were born."

"He's a Death Eater."

Like lightning, James sprang up from his position on the wall and was stood directly in front of Harry, peering down at his slightly shorter son with deadly serious eyes. "What are you talking about? This is no joking matter."

"I'm not joking."

Slowly, James put both hands on Harry's shoulder, forcing him to meet his gaze. "You do realize how serious of an accusation this is, right?"

Harry nodded.

"Do you have proof?"

Harry hesitated. Wormtail had worn short sleeves, with no Mark in sight. "No. You've got to trust me, I just know. He'll betray us; he's been working with Voldemort since –I dunno– probably a year before I was born."

"And how did you come across this information?"

"I can't –I can't say," he said lamely. Because I'm from another freaking world.

"Harry, I'm an Auror. I won't expose your source."

"I just can't, okay?" Harry said, shaking James's hands off. "Please, you've got to believe me."

James bit his lip. "It's not a question of not trusting you, Harry, but a question of how much I trust Peter. We've been friends since Hogwarts –he was there with us the night Voldemort murdered Frank and Alice. He was even our Secret Keeper after their murders, at great risk to himself because several top Death Eater were coming after us relentlessly, trying to finish what their master started. I trust you, Harry –but I trust him too. I'll look into it, but unless you have solid proof, that's all I can really do."

Harry's stomach sank. He was tempted to argue further but knew from the firm resolve in James's eyes that the subject was closed, and that it'd be no use trying to convince him further. But he must be a Death Eater; Harry couldn't comprehend a situation in which he wasn't. But a simple Revealio would not expose the spell that was hiding his Mark; much stronger magic would be needed, and a genuine reason to suspect him necessary to convince his parents to conduct that search.

Just a few minutes later, right before dinner was about to begin, Mum also pulled him aside.

"Harry, if you're not feeling well, you need to tell me now before you have another seizure like you did on your birthday," she said sternly.

"I'm not sick!" he said loudly. "I'm worried that something's going to happen."

Lily shook her head. "Harry –"

"I'm fine," he snapped. "But if something happens, none of us will be."

"Honey, Peter is our friend," Lily said earnestly, almost begging Harry to see sense. "Please don't ruin Christmas for Neville just because –"

"Just because I think Wormtail's going to kill us all?" Harry retorted angrily, frustrated that nobody seemed to be listening to him. Do you really think I want to ruin my first Christmas?

"Harry!" Lily snapped. Harry immediately shut up. "I don't know what's going on with you, but Dad and I can't help you with it unless you tell us what's going on!"

"Nothing's going on except that a traitor is in our house!"

Lily rubbed her temples in irritation. "Harry –please," she said quietly. "Don't bring the war into our home."

Harry looked away. So that was why they were being so blind. They needed a break from the constant dangers of the world, even if danger was just in the other room.

But this was his mother, and even though she had done so much for him by sacrificing herself, allowing him to leave, Harry has never had the chance to do anything for her, to repay her somehow. He wanted to show her that he loves her, even if it was a distant love like one you have for a mythical figure, the imaginary friend that you know isn't real. Now it's tangible, he knows her as Lily, not just the mother who saved him, the sister her own flesh and blood refused to acknowledge.

He knew Mum.

"Alright," he conceded with great difficulty. "I'm sorry."

Lily's lips pursed, as if she knew that Harry didn't really mean it. And she was right; Harry's intention was to watch Wormtail's every move, keeping his wand in accessible range. Still, if she wanted to say something more, she did a good job of hiding it.

"Dinner's ready," she said instead.

Dinner was a rather tense affair, the tension sometimes cut when Sirius would make a joke or when Remus accidentally spilled wine all over himself, giving Sirius another punch line, another confused glance at the other occupants of the table.

Neville was making a good effort to enjoy the holiday, but Violet still seemed to hold the grudge from Halloween.

"Pass the mutton, please," Neville asked the air.

His avoidance of addressing her personally only seemed to infuriate Violet further. She smiled deceptively sweetly, but her hand slipped and poured some salt on Neville's lap.

"Oops," was the only word she said to him for the rest of the evening.

Harry tried to ignore the tension between him and his parents, instead attempting to focus his attention on covertly watching Wormtail. The only people who didn't seem to be having a row were the other three Marauders, who kept on glancing at each other all night, puzzled at their hosts' strangely distant behavior.

Needless to say, no one was particularly disappointed when the last plate was licked clean.

"So," Lily said as people began to stand up. "The big kids can stay up late, but the little ones –" She stared pointedly at Harry, Neville, and Violet. "Need to go to bed. And no peeking at the presents!"

Harry and Neville exchanged grins as they began to walk out.

"Reckon we should try to sneak a peek?" Neville whispered.

"Nah. Wouldn't put it past them to set booby traps or something."

"Harry?" James asked from behind. "Could you stay behind for a moment? Go on Neville, Harry will meet you upstairs."

Suddenly feeling apprehensive, Harry nervously followed his dad back to the dinner table, the only other occupant in the room being Mum, who cast a Silencing Charm on the room to give them privacy.

"We want to apologize for yelling at you earlier," Lily said once they sat down. "But we were worried; you haven't been quite yourself since your birthday. I really didn't want to have to talk to you about this on Christmas, but judging from dinner no one's going to have a very enjoyable holiday if this keeps up."

"This may be completely off base, but I have to ask it." James took a deep breath. "Harry, are you taking drugs?"

"What? No!" Harry exclaimed indignantly. He didn't even know there were magical versions of Muggle drugs. Well, from Violet he learned that abusing potions exist, but still –

"You're absolutely sure?" Lily pressed.

"I think I'd know," Harry said dryly.

"We're trusting your word on this, Harry," James said.

"I'm not lying."

"So you didn't do anything to trigger that seizure and increased paranoia?"

"Increased paranoia?" Harry asked weakly.

"Your accusations about Peter."

For Aurors, they were really stupid. "The only thing that 'triggered' that 'increased paranoia' was Wormtail choosing to work for Voldemort!" Harry shouted, anger and frustration boiling in his veins. "Merlin, why can't you just trust me on this? I've proven myself, haven't I? Diagon Alley, Halloween...why isn't that enough for you to trust me?"

He knew that feeling rejected was irrational, but he couldn't help it. He was suddenly very aware of how much of a tourist he was, in a way. He had been thrust into these people's lives, disrupting their daily life and causing change, good or bad.

Still, they were his family, his mum and dad and sister. All things he could never have. And why not, he thought angrily, why can't I have them? Ron has a huge family, but mine is dead. Hell, Violet doesn't even exist! He wanted this. Even with the fighting and the trust issues, he knew deep down that this was better than nothing.

"Oh honey," Lily said softly, noticing her son's distress. Her chair made no noise on the ornate carpet as she got up and sat on Harry's left, enveloping him in a tight hug.

"You've always been a good kid," James said, "and you've certainly earned our respect lately. But take a moment to really think about what you're asking of us. Is it so hard to understand being reluctant

about even thinking that a man who's as good as a brother to me betraying us?"

He had a point. If anyone told him that Ron was planning on murdering him, Harry'd probably sock the accuser right then and there.

"I understand," Harry said truthfully, "but that doesn't make me any less right."

Lily drew out of their embrace, looking solemn. "We love you, Harry. I love you. I'd throw myself into a pit of snakes for you, and I'll consider what you're saying about Peter, horrific though it is."

Harry looked at his dad.

James sighed. "I –it's hard for me to even consider it, because it was painful enough sixteen years ago when nothing came out of our suspicions, but I agree with your Mum. We'll investigate it, but not now, not during Christmas. We can't just kick him out. Does that sound like a fair compromise to you?"

That sinking feeling in Harry's gut told him that no, it was not, but his heart told him differently.

"Yeah, that sounds fair."

Both parents smiled as James walked over to his wife and son. "Group hug, anyone?" They complied, and Harry felt that distance between them ebbing away. Something inside him warmed, knowing that by those three words, "I love you," that they've accepted him, and there was no better feeling than that.

"Get to bed, Harry, or Father Christmas won't come." James winked. "And don't eat the cookies, because I –er, I mean Father Christmas—really loves Mum's gingerbread men."

Harry grinned. "I think I can resist the temptation. Good night." However, right as he was about to shut the door behind him, something occurred to him. He'd never said it to them, but he couldn't

help but feel that emotion so powerfully in that moment, having had his first lecture, fight, and make up with his parents.

Say it now, idiot, before you lose the chance, Harry scolded himself. Taking a deep breath, Harry opened his mouth to express the sentiments he'd never said to anyone else, not even Ginny.

"Love you Mum, Dad."

"Draco. Wake up, Draco. Now."

"Bloody hell, Goyle, it's seven o'clock in the bloody morning, not your back waxing appointment," Draco mumbled, slapping the hand on his shoulder away and throwing his pillow on top of his head.

"I don't think Goyle Sr. would appreciate your sarcasm."

The wheels clicked in place as Draco realized he wasn't at Hogwarts anymore, sleeping in his four poster with his fellow seventh years.

To his surprise, Lucius didn't frown and berate him again on what virtues the "proper" Malfoy heir should exhume.

"Quickly, get dressed in the Death Eater garb," he said instead. "We have a new mission."

Draco suddenly found himself very awake. "Who, where, and when?" he asked as casually as he could.

Lucius eyed his son with an expression Draco couldn't identify. "This will be your third task. Almost broke your mother's heart last time, when you were caught. Don't let it happen again."

"Yes Father."

"As for your question –the hit will be our esteemed 'Chosen One' at the Potter residence. Take Longbottom, execute the rest."

Draco's heart raced. The first time he got useful information, and it was a major attack. Great. He needed to get Father out of his room, send word to the Order, and hope he doesn't get caught. Draco

wasn't stupid; he would never flirt with the idea of telling Father he was a spy. Father would turn him over to Voldemort, he knew it –the Dark Lord was the only person Lucius was more loyal to after himself.

Then Draco realized he hadn't completely answered his question. "When is the attack again?" he asked carefully.

Lucius turned around, hand resting elegantly on the doorknob. His cold gray eyes met his son's as his lips parted to answer.

"Now."

"Presents!" Violet squealed as she leaped onto Harry's bed, narrowly avoiding crushing Neville underneath her feet.

"Merlin, Vi, is that all you think about?" Harry grumbled as he swatted her hands away in an attempt to stop her from shaking his shoulders.

"I think nearly murdering me is on her agenda every day," Neville said loudly, yawning and stretching from his sleeping bag on the floor.

Violet spared him a disgusted glare but otherwise ignored their guest. "So," she said to Harry, fiddling with her frizzy, unkempt hair. "You ready for a surprise or what?"

"No," Harry groaned. "I'm ready to go back to bed. Go away."

But just as he pulled the covers over his head, Violet yanked them away with surprising strength, flinging them over a protesting Neville.

"Hey!" Harry growled, sleepily reaching for his glasses on his nightstand. "No fair."

Smirking, Violet also pulled out Harry's pillow from under him, chucking it hard at Neville's head, which had just emerged from under the offending blanket.

"Clearly you enjoy violence."

Violet only smiled. "All necessary in the pursuit of good."

“What’s good about waking us up at six in the morning?” Neville asked grumpily, rubbing his head.

“Presents!” Violet repeated, throwing her arms out wide.

“Can’t deny her that, can we?” Harry said to Neville.

“I reckon we can,” Neville disagreed.

Violet raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Now boys, do I really need to flip over your mattress?”

Harry and Neville exchanged glances. “As if you could,” Neville said.

In response, Violet slipped off the bed on the other side. Grinning, she whipped out her wand and, with a flick, sent Harry’s mattress flipping over. Anticipating this, Neville scrambled out of the way as Harry landed in the exact place Neville had just been.

Groaning, Harry got up from his place on the floor to see Violet clutching her side, laughing hysterically.

“Oh, you think that’s funny, do you?” Harry said mischievously as he stalked over to his sister.

She seemed to realize his intentions, because her eyes widened as she tried to escape, but found her way blocked by Neville. Harry caught Violet in a headlock and started fiercely tickling her.

“Stop!” I surrender, I surrender!” she shrieked as Neville began laughing at the sight.

The door banged open aggressively as the adults ran in, looking worried.

“Merlin, you three, it sounded like someone was being murdered!” Lily exclaimed, pocketing her wand and rubbing her eyes tiredly.

“Right mature lot, aren’t they?” Sirius said, grinning. “Bit like teenagers I used to know.”

Remus snorted. "I believe you were the immature one, Padfoot."

Sirius smirked. "You make an excellent observation, Moony. However, I think it renders a demonstration." With that, he raised his hands menacingly and turned to James.

"Don't you dare Padfoot," James warned, picking up the fallen pillow as a shield.

Sirius sighed. "No fun at all, Prongs. Unfortunately, this has forced me to conclude that the next best victim to prove my point would be...Mrs. Prongs!"

Before Lily could react, Sirius attacked her with his fingers, tickling her in where he knew she was most sensitive.

"I –I'm pregnant!" she shrieked in an attempt to save herself.

"Might as well get Mini Prongs the Third ready."

"Get away from my wife, you cretin!" James shouted, unable to resist an infectious grin as he began attacking Sirius's head with the pillow. "Moony, help me!"

Remus smirked. "Will do," he said as he walked over to the kids, tugging the last pillow out of Neville's hands. "Mind if I borrow this?"

But before Neville could answer Remus had joined James at the battleground, attacking Sirius's shoulder with eager fervor.

The kids looked at this display with shock, horror, and amusement. Looking at each other with grins on their faces, they voiced what they were all thinking.

"Right mature lot, aren't they?"

"The cookies are gone."

“Father Christmas was hungry,” James said defensively. “And some of his reindeer weren’t satisfied with their –er– grass.” He stared pointedly at Sirius and Peter.

“Where were you anyway?” Harry asked Wormtail.

“Not eating the last cookie,” Wormtail joked. “Had to go to the loo, actually.”

Harry nodded. “I see.” But when Wormtail looked away, Harry reached into his pocket to touch his wand, comforted by the surge of magic at his fingertips. Harry recalled his “Baby’s First Christmas” ornament, and voiced his question. “Would this be considered the baby’s first Christmas?”

Lily smiled, shaking her head. “No, it counts once he or she’s born.”

They all sat in a circle in front of the Christmas tree, eyeing the numerous presents under the tree.

“Why don’t you pick a random one, Violet?” Lily suggested.

Violet nodded, reaching for the most convenient one. “It’s for you, Harry,” she said as she passed it over to him.

Harry grinned uncontrollably. This was going to be the very first Christmas present he would open with his family. However, his grin slipped as he opened the card. Happy Christmas Harry! From Uncle Peter. He looked up and met Wormtail’s eyes, forcing a smile onto his face. There was a feral look in Wormtail’s eyes, like a rat who knew the piece of cheese was a trick but wanted it anyway.

Looking down at the red and gold wrapper, Harry couldn’t help but feel a nervous churning in his gut, almost as if he could feel something was going to happen. He briefly met the eyes of his family, and unceremoniously tore apart the wrapping, revealing a box inside. Carefully, Harry lifted the lid to reveal a glass rendering of Harry’s Firebolt. Wormtail watched his reaction.

“Surprise?”

BANG. Everyone leapt to their feet immediately, eyes wild.

“What was that?” Violet demanded.

“Sounded like a door being blasted open,” Neville whispered, face paling as screams were heard from a distance.

The adults exchanged alarmed looks as they quickly drew their wands.

“But the wards!” Lily exclaimed.

“Must have gotten through somehow,” James muttered. “Seal the doors, hurry! Should buy us time.”

“Sirius, the Portkey!”

“Where’s Peter?” Remus asked as he finished the Sealing Charm.

James looked around wildly, cursing under his breath. “We have to leave him.”

Sirius’s eyes widened as he returned with the emergency Portkey. “James, we can’t!”

James looked away, eyes hard. “No choice. He can transform and escape, they can’t,” he said, pointing to his family and Neville. “They’re our first priority.”

“No time to argue,” Lily said, ushering everyone around the Portkey.

But with another booming BANG both the wards and walls were shattered by a combination of spells that seemed to come from both inside and outside the room. Dark cloaks and white masks filed the room as everyone struggled to rise from the ground where the blast had scattered them.

“Protego!” Lily shouted, a large, powerful shield surrounding them all.

“Get over here!” James bellowed, Portkey in hand. Everyone scrambled to reach James but the force of Lily’s shield being broken only pushed them further away.

“Dad!” Violet screamed as blue lights streaked towards him. James leapt aside as the light grazed his leg. Crying out in pain, James Stunned the Death Eater and crawled towards Violet, his leg utterly useless. Violet got out her own wand and brought up a shield around them, trying to Stun the surrounding Death Eaters.

Remus reached them just as more Death Eaters joined the fray, helping Violet fend them off.

James, Lily’s voice said urgently. She’s used the Connection Charm again. Activate the Portkey now!

I can’t leave you, James answered stubbornly, injuring a Death Eater, I won’t.

First priority, James.

You’re my first priority.

Get Violet and Remus to safety.

Stop trying to be a bloody hero!

James, go! We’ll take the Floo.

James bit his lip. He didn’t want to leave, but he can’t do much and he was keeping his daughter in danger the longer he stayed.

I love you.

I love you, James. He inhaled, letting his wife’s voice wash over him, allowed it to linger. Now go!

With one last look at Lily Potter, James activated the Portkey; he, Remus, and Violet were gone.

Meanwhile, Harry and Sirius were back to back, dueling their respective opponents while ducking spells from the others. Harry tried to Apparate again, but found himself blocked by the anti-Apparation wards, which they were unable to remove despite their greatest efforts; some Death Eater must be constantly reapplying it.

Flash. Bang. Red. Green. Blue. Purple. A flurry of spells and colors were fired and ducked in a quick succession of instincts as Harry's Quidditch trained muscles saved him numerous times from harm.

Suddenly, Harry became aware that it was only him and Sirius with Lily and Neville, who seemed very uncertain of himself and only sent occasional stunners.

"Damn it, Neville, do something!" Harry screamed over the wave of seemingly endless black cloaks. Their Order guard, the wards, it was all gone—they were all that's left.

The Floo, Sirius! Lily's voice echoed in their minds. Order network! To buy him some time, Lily cast another giant shield over them, Harry and Neville following her lead by strengthening it with layers of their own shields. Sirius grabbed the fistful of Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace. "Order of the Phoenix, Number 12 Grimmauld Place," he whispered. "Password: Bumblebee." Green fire roared in the fire as their collective shield began to weaken.

"Go Sirius!" Lily shouted.

"Ladies first!" Sirius retorted, waving Harry and Neville over.

"No Sirius, you first," Lily said, flicking her wand to force Sirius into the fire.

The shield was cracking; they only had a few seconds before it completely broke. Neville stepped into the fire without hesitation, gone right after Sirius, but Harry remained.

"Mum, c'mon!" he shouted.

“Go, Harry, I’ll come right after!” Lily grunted, straining under the pressure of holding up the shield as long as she could.

“I’ll help, Mum!” Harry said, rushing forward. It was his fault; he should never have allowed his parents to win the argument, allowed Wormtail to stay. The Order members guarding their home are dead, and it’s his fault.

“No you won’t!” Lily shouted, her wandless magic flinging Harry back to the edge of the fireplace. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead as she felt the strain of magic becoming too much. “I love you so much, Harry,” she said before giving him one last magical push into the fireplace.

The shield broke, and Lily could feel something inside her cracking dangerously as she impacted the wall behind her. For a brief, terrifying moment, her sense of hearing was completely gone. But eventually, as dust and debris fell innocently on her, it began to come back numbly.

“– Floo network. See if we can follow.”

No, Lily thought with horror. It was her only way out of her destroyed home, but she couldn’t allow those bastards to reach her family. It was her duty as an Auror and a mother to do the right thing, the loving thing.

Her family was much more important to her than her own life.

Exhausted though she was, Lily found herself tapping into her baby’s magic in desperation. With the last of her strength, she closed the Floo Network. For a moment, she thought she had blacked out, but her vision was spinning as she swam in and out of consciousness. There was no more energy left in her body; she had drained everything, even the magic of her unborn child. How she regretted that it would never meet its brother and sister, allow its father to cuddle and love it. She could only hope it would understand what she did, why she did it.

Lily sincerely hoped James would understand. They had nearly three decades of wonderful, amazing years together, and that was all she could ask for in these dangerous times. If even the slightest thing had been different, she may have only had four, three years, maybe even none.

“– filthy Mudblood.”

“Can’t do much about it now.”

“You! Malfoy! Get your arse over here!”

Lily forced her eyes open, looking up and meeting wide, scared gray eyes above her.

Some hooded figure shoved the younger Malfoy closer to Lily’s sprawled position on the floor, sneering cruelly. “Serves you right, letting your mask fall off like that. Besides, you’ve got to make up for your earlier weakness, when you couldn’t kill Dumbledore. You can kill a measly Mudblood, can’t you?”

Draco’s eyes widened even further as he shook his head rapidly. He couldn’t, he wouldn’t. Lily Potter saved his life –he owed her a Wizard’s Debt for that. And she was pregnant, with child; what kind of monster would he be if he went through with this?

“No,” he mumbled, “no, no, I can’t!”

Lily’s eyes locked with his in an intense gaze. Merlin, she was giving him permission. She was telling him with those piercing eyes that it was okay, that she forgave him for what he was about to do. Oh Merlin. Mudblood or not, he couldn’t kill a pregnant woman, especially not her, not after what she did for him.

A growl escaped from underneath the hooded figure behind him, sending cold shivers down his back. “You’ll do it boy, or I’ll rip your throat for treachery. Or,” Fenrir hissed, “have you defected, Draco? First Dumbledore, now this abomination, this shame of blood? Did something pass during your capture in the Ministry? Perhaps a little affair?”

Draco's nose scrunched up involuntarily. "I would never lower myself to such an atrocity," he said stiffly, turning up his nose with an aristocratic air. "And I'm insulted you would even suggest it. My only loyalty is to the Dark Lord, and the Dark Lord alone. I –" he paused, trying to mix half-truths with lies. "I hesitate because I believe killing to be messy and –and hard," he finished lamely.

Fenrir smirked, baring his teeth. "Best you get used to it, then. Believe me, once you start, the rush will be so invigorating you won't even think of the mess. Avada Kedavra is quick and clean. Do it now."

"Wait!"

Draco turned around, hope leaping in his heart. The Wizard's Debt was starting to take its toll now, increasing pressure in his head as it tried to stop him from breaking it. The pressure released slightly just as Lucius Malfoy swept over gracefully.

"I'll do it," he offered, not even sparing his son a glance when Draco stared. "This is only his third mission. Draco was captured and tortured recently, and is shaken by that event. Allow him some time before being ready to do what others nearly did to him."

Fenrir's eyes narrowed. "I bit five children on my first mission for the Dark Lord, Lucius. Draco should be capable of doing this task on his third. Back away, before I make you."

Lucius hesitated, looking as if he wanted to argue, but stepped back nevertheless, his eyes coldly aristocratic once again.

Draco shook from head to toe as the pressure resumed. He had to hate, like it when he performed the Killing Curse, and he couldn't possibly hate Lily Potter, despite who her son is.

It's alright. I'm dead either way.

He jumped as Lily's worn voice entered his head. I can't, Draco thought wildly for an excuse, the Wizard's Debt won't let me.

I release –

No! I don't want to be released. I owe you.

Lily sighed. Draco, for that moment when they were connected, could feel her strength ebbing away. She was right. If he didn't kill her, she'd die of exhaustion, of physical and magical depletion. I transfer your Wizard's Debt to any member of the Potter family. Do it now, Draco, or your cover is blown. I told you this would be a hard job, but I believed you could do it, and you can. Cast the curse.

I'm so sorry. And, to Draco's surprise, he meant it. He had never been sorrier for anything in his life, even for his hand in Dumbledore's death.

Feeling the Wizard Debt's pressure lift from him, Draco's head cleared. He swallowed, feeling the terrible lump in his throat. Merlin, he was really going to do this. He really was weak. If he were a Gryffindor, he would have found a way to save them both, and maybe get killed in the process. But he wasn't. He was a Slytherin, and they were the ones who did the unthinkable to preserve their cover.

Draco raised his wand, tried to stop his fingers from shaking, and trained it on Lily. Her eyes were open in a last stand of defiance. He closed his own eyes and cast his mind around for who he really hated. Immediately, his conscious mind came up with a name –Harry Potter. But he realized in the next second that he didn't truly hate Harry, just the fact that he had things Draco could never have.

Something clicked, and Draco steadied his hand, hatred pulsing in his veins as he thought of the Dark Lord, how he had torn his family apart, how he had forced Draco to indirectly murder someone who didn't deserve it. He felt Father's eyes on him as he opened his eyes, thinking about how invigorating it would be if it were Voldemort in front of him. Draco's lips twitched wildly at the thought as he said the words.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Green light flashed towards Lily Potter, briefly illuminating her eyes before the muscles in her body slumped, dead and unmoving.

The room was silent as Draco stared at her wide, clear eyes, shaking in horror about what he'd done, how he could have felt pleasure before killing her. He could see the bump where her baby was, never to be born. A wave of sorrow like he'd never felt before compelled him to drop his wand on the floor and walk closer to her body, his feet like lead on the once pristine carpet.

He scanned her face, which neither looked terrified nor hateful. Slowly, suddenly very aware of how dirty his fingers were, Draco reached out to close her eyes.

"No!" Fenrir growled. "Leave it. Let her blood traitor husband and dirty brats see her eyes wide open and dead."

Draco closed his eyes, tempted to disobey and do the right thing, but knew he couldn't. Not without making Fenrir more suspicious than he already was. Heavily, he stood up and stepped back.

"Good work, Draco," Fenrir said, putting a rough, scarred hand on his shoulder. Draco struggled not to shiver. "For a moment there, I thought you had actually defected! Imagine that!" He threw his head back and laughed wildly, the chorus of Death Eaters behind joining him. Draco managed a weak laugh, but refused to give him any more satisfaction than that.

"Let's go, everyone," Lucius snapped. "There's nothing more we can do here. Draco, finish up."

Draco nodded numbly and watched as Pettigrew removed the anti-Apparation wards, allowing everyone to Apparate back home or to Headquarters to inform Voldemort about the results. However, he stayed behind, waited until they had all gone, except Pettigrew. The traitor walked over to Lily, staring down at his friend with the utmost sorrow and regret. Glancing at Draco, and realizing he would not tell, Pettigrew reached down and closed Lily Potter's eyes.

“I’m sorry, Lily,” he whispered in her ear, lowering his voice so that it was inaudible to Draco. He knelt there for a few moments, whispering his goodbyes or excuses to his friend. “But –Snape was right, Lily, I’m no Gryffindor. I never meant you to die for my own survival.”

Draco caught the last part, and he wondered about the irony of this statement. Pettigrew had every chance to turn himself over to the Order, to his friends, but instead he chose betrayal, and he was asking for her forgiveness?

With a pop, Pettigrew was gone. Draco bent down to pick up his wand, panicking when he found it no longer there.

“Looking for this, Draco?”

Draco jumped at the familiarly dry voice. He thought everyone had left. “Professor Snape?”

Harry slumped in an armchair in front of the fire, his head in his hands as he replayed every second in his head. Why the hell had he shouted at Mum? Hadn’t he distracted her rather than help her? Stupid, stupid sodding idiot!

Why had he gotten so lazy, why had he forgotten that there was a bloody war going on outside of his little fantasy? Why had he gotten so wrapped up in his personal issues that he’d forgotten the big picture?

Because you were afraid you’d never get this chance again.

He remembered the fire, fighting tooth and nail inside the Floo network to get back. Unfortunately, he had found something blocking him and eventually tumbled out of Grimmauld’s fireplace, facing a stricken James, who had tried to jump back into the fire where Harry had just fallen out to no avail.

“Where’s Lily?” he asked, eyes wild. “Where is she?”

That sinking feeling in the pit of Harry’s stomach was making him sick. He sneaked a glance over at Violet and Neville, who were sitting close together in stiff, stony silence, each deep in thought. Neville’s

hands kept on twitching, grasping and releasing, like there was something he should have that was missing.

A slammed door echoed throughout the house, alerting the room's occupants to James and Sirius's return. Immediately, Violet sprang up from her seat and ran clumsily across the room.

"Daddy!" she said, screeching to a stop in front of him. Nervously, she looked behind him but found no one except Sirius. "Where's Mum?" she asked, her voice quietly breaking.

James looked as if he wanted to look anywhere else but at his daughter's face, but he kept a steady gaze on her. "She's . . . she's gone."

Violet's eyes widened, staring at James in disbelief, slowly shaking her head in denial. Her whole body wracked with emotion until her knees buckled from underneath her and she fell onto the thousand-year-old carpet, hair falling into her eyes.

Harry, however, stood up and slowly walked towards his dad, his steps sluggish. Thoughts, memories, smells, and colors flashed through his mind as he tried to comprehend this piece of information. He couldn't.

"Dad –" he begged. It couldn't be true. Mum couldn't have died for him twice. It was physically impossible.

Harry felt cold. Shivers wracked at his body as that terrible detachment set in. His fault. His responsibility. His mistake. It was because of him, because he was the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One, the one who constantly caused the deaths of those he loved –

But he wasn't any of those things here. Sharp tears pricked the edge of his eyes as an angry, desperate question rose up inside of him. Why, when things were so different, was everything the same? People still died; people still left him once he began to think that maybe –just maybe– he could be normal, that his "power the Dark Lord knows not" would actually prevent the people he loves from dying.

Sacrifice was noble and all, but what about the people who were left behind?

How could he think about this of his mother? She had died for him, and he'd wasted it by not being able to save her this time, perhaps even holding her up during the battle, losing precious seconds when she could have escaped. Yet, despite this he couldn't regret the time he'd spent getting to know her as a person, and not a picture.

Ashamed, Harry met his dad's eyes, recoiling when he saw angry hatred blazing within hazel. Without warning, James lunged forward and aggressively wrapped his rough hands around Harry's neck, throwing his son up onto the wall.

"Prongs!" Sirius exclaimed. "What d'you think you're doing?"

James ignored him, his full attention on Harry. Slowly, his grip relaxed as Harry began to pale dangerously, but the venom in his eyes didn't fade. "You bastard," he hissed. "You deceived us all, almost –almost made me think Peter, little Peter, might have betrayed us when you –"

He was cut off mid-sentence as Sirius wrenched his best mate away from Harry, desperately trying to restrain the stricken man. "James, Lily wouldn't want to see you like this. How can you accuse him? He's your son!"

"He's not my son."

Harry reeled back, hitting the cold wall. Dizziness settled in as a painful lump grew in his throat, accented further as those words echoed in his mind: He's not my son, he's not my son . . .

He didn't think anybody could make him hurt more than he already had, but he'd been proven wrong before. Those four words of rejection, of hatred, of spite, were enough to make him slide hard to the floor, and hide his face again in his hands, scolded and lashed.

James wrenched Sirius's hands off of him, an almost feral look in his eyes. "He's a fucking Death Eater, replaced Harry somehow ever since his birthday." He looked down at Harry with disgust. "I always thought something was different about you. You killed Lily, you son of a bitch!" James lunged forward, but as Harry instinctively leapt up and drew his wand, Violet stepped resolutely in front of him. When he saw her, James stopped himself immediately at her feet.

Tears spilled messily from Violet's blood-shot eyes as she stared back at her dad. "Stop it," she whispered hoarsely, "just...stop it. We lost Mum and –and the baby already, do we have to lose Harry too?"

The wildness in James's eyes faded at these words, replaced with agonizing grief that seemed far greater than anything else. He closed his eyes for a moment, composing himself, before turning on his heel and slowly walked out of the room.

Violet bit back a sob, unsure of whether or not she did the right thing. Harry stood rigidly, his wand still drawn and his stance aggressive. Neville watched this unfold from his safe sanctuary on the sofa, his hands grasping and releasing the book he should have in his hands, and the wand he should have used in the battle. Sirius watched the Potter family fall apart right before his eyes, wondering how the hell this could have happened.

"Neville, you need to stay in this room for your own safety," Sirius said in a tone of practiced calm. "Harry, Violet, you can go up to the usual guest room if you need the privacy," he added in a kinder tone. Never show weakness; Aurors are supposed to be the ones who know what to do when others don't. "I'll get James." He gently lowered Harry's wand. "Don't –I'm sure he didn't mean it. He's dealing with a lot right now."

Harry nodded numbly, not quite registering Sirius's words.

He had never seen Sirius look so solemn before, so haunted, so much like his Sirius. James's eyes were feral and wild, Sirius's blank and dull, lacking the sparkle Harry had become accustomed to seeing in this Sirius.

Gentle fingers grabbed his hand and effortlessly lead him up to a room Harry didn't recognize. He didn't even spare a passing glance at the ornate mirror, the dust that lingered listlessly in the air, or that Violet had let go of his hand and crawled onto the bed, taking a fancy pillow and hugging it close to her chest as if she'd never let go.

Falling into the chair behind him heavily, Harry raised his eyes to the ceiling as his rampant, numb thoughts tried to organize themselves to no avail. He decided that if he squinted really carefully, he could see faint specks on the ceiling, as if they were dust stars. Harry almost smiled as he remembered Aunt Petunia's obsession with cleaning up dust bunnies, her own personal house pest. Would she come to her sister's funeral? Did she the first time, during the original death? Harry's heart constrained at the thought.

Was Mum among the stars now, just one of many casualties in a hard war?

Harry felt someone staring at him, a feeling he was used to by now. Tearing his eyes away from the star speckled ceiling, his eyes found Violet's, who peered at him from behind her pillow defense. Hiding behind a comforting object, her legs tucked behind her, Violet looked unusually small and vulnerable.

For a long time brother and sister just stared at each other, a distancing stalemate between them. Harry didn't know if he was imagining it or not, but he could have sworn there was a hint of fear in Violet's eyes –fear of him.

"I didn't," he croaked. "You know I didn't. I would never."

Violet breathed out a long sigh, gently placing the pillow to the side and sitting on the edge of the bed, her arms crossed and defensive. Her eyes were hard now, as if she was protecting herself from something she had been expecting.

"I –I want answers now," she snapped. "No bullshit, no getting around it, nothing. I want the truth, and nothing else."

Harry couldn't have lied to her even if he wanted to. After all he's done to her family, she deserves his honest answers.

"All right," he said quietly, dread growing in his stomach.

Violet took a deep breath, steeling herself.

"You're not my brother, are you?"

Harry blinked. “Wh –what?”

Violet narrowed her eyes. “You’re not my brother; I know that much.”

Indignant anger gnawed at Harry as his father’s accusing words cut into him again. “So you think I’m a Death Eater too?” he sneered. “Think I did that to Mum?”

She hesitated. “No,” she said truthfully. “No, I don’t think so. But I know you’re not Harry. Are –are you a changeling?”

“No,” Harry said tiredly, sinking back in the armchair. “I –” He stopped as a frightening realization hit him. Until now he had managed to keep his identity secret from both his family and friends, but now that the moment was here, when he would be declared a fraud, Harry felt rather hesitant about telling the truth. After all, who would believe him if he said he came from another world?

Then again, this is the magical world, and Harry felt obligated to tell Violet the truth. He owed her that much.

He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Despite whatever resolve he had, Harry just couldn’t find the words. He would speak honestly, but there were some things he didn’t want her to know. He’ll give her the bare minimum, just that he came from another world, but that’s it. He didn’t have the heart to tell her that Mum and Dad were dead, that she didn’t exist. It would be hard, but he’d find a way around it; he had to.

Violet must have noticed his struggle, because she decided to help out. “What’s your name?” she asked quietly, afraid of the answer.

“Harry Potter.”

Violet frowned. She didn’t look like she believed him. “You said you’d give me the truth.”

“It is the truth. Give me Veritaserum if you’re not sure.” It was a dangerous game, but he knew it was what it took for Violet to be

reassured about his honesty. Besides, Harry knew his sister; she would never use Veritaserum on him.

He watched her carefully, and after a while Violet slowly nodded her head in acceptance before rapidly changing tactics.

“Who are your parents?”

“Lily and James Potter.”

“Where do you live?”

“Surrey.”

“With who?”

“My uncle, aunt, and cousin.”

“The Dursleys?”

“Yeah.”

“School?”

“Hogwarts.”

“House, year?”

“Gryffindor seventh year.”

“Best mates?”

“Ron and Hermione.”

“That explains a lot,” Violet muttered under her breath. “Favorite class?”

“Defense Against the Dark Arts,” Harry replied, unsure why she was asking this.

“Teacher?”

“Professor Lupin, third year.”

“Food?”

“Er –I dunno.”

The questions flew out faster. “Chocolate frog or Fanged Frisbee?”

“What?”

“Play Quidditch?”

“Er –yeah. Seeker and captain.”

“What’s your broom?”

“A firebolt.”

“Patronus?”

“Stag.”

“What’re all of the Marauders’ Animagus forms?”

“Stag, dog, rat.”

“Do you like Professor Snape?”

“No.”

“Potions?”

“Not really.”

“Ever worn a kilt?”

“Er –”

“When did Mum and Dad die?”

“Halloween, when I was one,” Harry answered automatically, Violet’s rapid questioning preventing his brain from properly catching up. His eyes widened in horror as he realized his slip up. Damn, she was good.

Violet stopped her interrogation, hugging the pillow closer to herself. “One years old, huh? Guess I was never born.”

“But how –”

“You said you lived with the Dursleys.”

“Oh. Right.”

Silence elapsed between the siblings as Violet struggled with all this information and that for Harry, she didn’t exist. Harry didn’t know what to say or think, so he sat in his armchair, watching the dust constellations on the ceiling and wishing life were as simple as connecting the dots.

“Everyone’s gone?” Violet asked finally. “Mum, Dad, the Marauders?”

“Almost,” he replied, a heavy lump throbbing in his throat.

“Who’s still there?”

“Remus. Me. Wormtail,” he added with a sneer.

“Are they happy?”

“I think so.”

“Good.”

They fell silent again.

“So you didn’t know Mum and Dad?”

“No,” Harry admitted with a pang of sorrow. “I didn’t.”

“I’m glad you got to know them here.”

“Me too.”

Harry heard sniffing, looking up to see fresh tears in Violet’s eyes. Blurrily seeing Harry’s gaze on her, Violet tried to stifle her sobs, fiercely wiping her eyes, only for more tears to flow.

“I miss Mum,” she cried, burying her face in the pillow. “I want her back!” Without warning she began laughing; choked, hysterical laughter of someone who didn’t want to cry anymore. “Selfish, isn’t it, to want my Mummy when I’ve had her for fifteen years but you for a year? Isn’t it unfair to you? I only lost her once; you did twice.”

“It’s not selfish,” Harry said quietly. He had never felt more connected with his sister before that moment. They both just lost their mother, united with more than blood. With a single, universal loss, they found themselves understanding each other perfectly, because no one else lost their Mum. James lost a wife, Sirius a friend, but Lily was a mother only to Harry and Violet.

Harry was not a particularly affectionate person by nature, but something compelled his feet to carry him to Violet, his arms to wrap themselves around her in a hug, a comfort to both.

Hesitantly, Violet returned the hug, knowing that even though it wasn’t her Harry, it was Harry nonetheless, and she was glad he was here. Her mind was still reeling from all of this –Harry, from an alternate universe? It was probably one of the most ridiculous things she’d ever heard and quite frankly, she was a bit afraid for her own sanity. Only a complete loon would believe that. But she thinks she’d always known, in a way, with all the things he knew and shouldn’t, or should know but didn’t.

Still, Violet knew that if, instead of biting his lip uncertainly, Harry had claimed that he was Harry Potter from an alternate universe, world, or timeline, Violet would have laughed her head off before Stunning his

arse and dragging him to the Aurors to get his head examined. Hell, she should get her head examined. But the crazy thing is –

She believed him. After suspiciously observing and watching over him for months, whether it'd be blatant prying or following him to the library to see what he was up to, Violet knew he wasn't evil. Just very confused and lost.

Sort of like how she felt now.

All that stuff about alternate worlds and such were the theories of those crazy Muggle scientists, but Violet knew it to be true now. She felt that this was the real Harry, in a way. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but it just felt right now, like some piece of the puzzle had been solved.

"I love you, Harry," she said quietly, blinking away tears. Thank Merlin everyone else was okay, but Mum was still gone, and it killed her knowing that she'd never come back, never yell at her kids to stop fighting, never disgustingly make up with Dad when they thought they weren't looking, never ruffle her hair again, never wave goodbye with teary eyes every year when she sent her babies off to Hogwarts to make memories of their own.

Funny about the things she missed the most.

The door hesitantly creaked open after a low knock, but neither dared to break out of their embrace. For a terrifying moment, Harry thought it was Voldemort back to finish them off, but wasn't particularly relieved to see James Potter standing at the door, eyes red and puffy, his stance haggard and defeated.

Reluctantly, Harry broke apart from his sister and crossed the room back to his armchair beneath dusty constellations, feeling that distance ending the comforting understanding he reached with Violet.

James sighed loudly, relieving some of the tension in the room. He slowly forced his exhausted body to turn towards his son, his eyes unreadable.

"I'm sorry, Harry," he said. "I –I didn't mean to hurt you, accuse you. I don't know what I was thinking; I know you lost her too. Please forgive me," he added, a pleading note in his tone.

But Harry knew he was lying. Though he did seem sincerely sorry, James had known exactly what he was saying when he attacked Harry, calling him an imposter. Which, in a way, he was. He must have talked to Sirius, who probably laid out all the reasons why Harry wasn't a Death Eater, and James allowed himself to be talked out of his suspicions because denial was a hell of a lot easier than facing the truth.

"It's okay," Harry muttered. "We –" His throat suddenly felt very dry.

James nodded awkwardly, making Harry painfully aware of how everything fell apart. Just a week ago James was picking him up from the Hogwarts Express, happily telling him nostalgic stories about Lily and James in their youth.

After a few beats of uncomfortable silence, James crossed the room and sat down heavily on the bed next to Violet, who immediately wrapped her arms gently around her dad, shooting a sympathetic glance at her brother. James returned the embrace and kissed the top of Violet's head, unsure about what to say. He'd seen a lot of death in his life, and dealt with it, but he'd never felt this hollow before, not even when his parents died of dragon pox, or when the Longbottoms were murdered instead of them.

Lily was everything to him, the woman he loved more than life itself. He would die for her, but instead left with the Portkey, stranding her there with a Floo Network she probably sealed herself so he couldn't follow her back. Oh, the irony. For years he followed her around, trying to win her over. Ironically, this was the first time he couldn't follow her and she's gone. Just gone. Forever. She made a vow after the lake incident fifth year, but she never snogged the giant squid, maybe fate came back to claim her? James shook the ridiculous thought from his mind. He needed to get a hold of himself, knew it was selfish to get lost now. He had children who were innocent when it came to death, confused and hurting, and he had just snapped.

Her eyes had been blissfully closed, but James longed to see those sparkling green eyes again. But he wouldn't be able to bear it if he opened her eyes to see dull, lifeless emerald, the solidifying evidence that his Lily was dead.

So when he saw his son's eyes peering across the room, all of his suspicions surfaced again, the anger, confusion, frustration, audacity of accusing Peter came rushing back, and like a petulant teenager, he lashed out.

He looked over at Harry now, sitting quietly, almost defeated, in the armchair with a strange, longing look in his eyes. He was in no way involved with Lily's death, James could see that now. There was too much anguish there. For a brief moment, their eyes met, and understanding passed between them. Somehow, James got the feeling that Harry knew this empty feeling, and that he'd lost loved ones before.

How, James didn't know, but right now he didn't particularly care. He's got a tear streaked face buried in his shoulder, responsibility, a need to try and make things better, make the monster in the closet go away with a Banishing Charm.

With a pang of regret, James realized that his accusation had really wounded Harry. His son's eyes were now averted to the carpet, away from James's scrutiny. He was afraid his dad was going to reject him again. James knew all about rejection; it wasn't a nice feeling, but he'd never been falsely accused of being a Death Eater before.

"Harry."

A messy black head reluctantly looked up, obviously expecting the worst.

James patted the spot next to him. "Come here," he said as gently as he could. Enough damage has been done today.

Harry hesitated, but did sit down stiffly beside James, looking more uncomfortable than James had ever seen him. He put a comforting arm around Harry's shoulder, sighing when Harry flinched at his

touch. Not that he could blame him; after all, he had his hand on his son's throat today.

"I really am sorry," James said seriously, forcing Harry to look at him. "I'm your Dad; what I did was unforgivable, and I apologize for that more than anything else."

Harry's eyes flickered to the dusty ceiling. "I know," he said quietly. "I –I get it, really, I do. They're both gone now –Mum and the baby. In the sky."

James choked back the heavy lump in his throat. The baby. Kids were supposed to bury their parents, not the other way around. Except now, James would bury the person he loved the most, and the baby he never got a chance to know. It was only an idea now, a ghost of something that might have been a kid with green eyes, messy red hair, or knobby knees.

He shifted as Violet snuggled closer to him, something she hasn't done since she was ten. James leaned his head on hers, his arm still around Harry, and tried to take comfort in the fact that they were still here. It didn't help much.

"Daddy, I'm scared," Violet said softly, "I'm scared of forgetting Mum. How her hugs feel, how the kitchen smells when she cooks, everything. I don't want to forget."

James felt his heart breaking further, into miniscule pieces. He realized, quite suddenly, the extent of everything. Like his parents, like the Longbottoms, Lily was truly gone. Like the rest, he'd never again see her smile, hear her laugh, taste her lipstick as his lips brushed against hers. He didn't want to forget either, and the only thing he could do to remedy the situation was the one thing he didn't want to do –talk. Talk about your feelings, James, tell the world how it feels to have lost everything. How does it feel to lose your close friends, the Longbottoms, to an abomination you failed to destroy, who could have just as easily come for your family? How does it feel to lose friends in a war that should have ended years ago? How does it feel to lose a wife who you could have saved if you hadn't selfishly activated the Portkey?

He didn't want to talk about misery. He didn't want to feel sorrow and despair. He wanted to remember laughter and pranks, rejection and acceptance, victories before the toll of losses became so high that they forgot what they were fighting for. He wanted to remember her lingering scent, all the things he loved about her but would eventually forget over time. How he hated time. It never gave enough.

So he would say them now, to keep those connecting threads alive a little longer.

"Remember those days when it'd snow all day and night? It'd give us about a foot of snow. That doesn't happen a lot now, bloody global warming." Yet another unwelcome change, James thought bitterly.

Violet smiled in reminiscence. "We'd have huge snowball fights, build massive forts and all. You and Mum would always beat us, but that's not fair because you've had loads more experience than we do."

James smirked. "Ah yes, the annual inter-House snowball fights. I think I've already told you this before, but one time seventh year, Sirius, completely piss drunk, went charging at the Ravenclaw line of defense, completely ignored the dozens of snowballs hitting him. Went out to help him, but Ravenclaws can be surprisingly merciless when they want to and they started bombarding me. Played dead to get them off, but someone was poking and prodding me, calling 'Potter! Potter, get your lazy arse up!' Your Mum, of course, but it was too good a chance to pass up. She started to get worried, prodded me harder until she suddenly started asking for the nurse. I surprised her by leaping up and shoving snow down the front of her shirt. Not a very intelligent move on my part, I don't recommend trying it."

Violet smiled in appreciation. "What happened next?" she asked, even though she'd already heard this story. James turned to Harry and saw a very different reaction. Harry's head was slightly tilted towards James, and there was such longing and hunger in his face that almost convinced James that Harry had never heard this story before, even though he's sure he had.

“She screamed of course, chased me all around the grounds, yelling her head off about ‘Potter, you pervert!’ Everyone stopped the snowball fight just to watch us.” James, on a brilliantly impulsive urge, laughed. It hurt his throat, lungs and heart to do so, but the pain was worth it to be able to feel, to imagine seventeen-year-old Lily’s face flushed with rage and cold, at one point picking up a stick from the ground and brandishing it in the air while screaming death threats.

They talked like this for a while, reminiscing everything that came to their minds. James did a lot of the talking, recounting tales of their Hogwarts years, the wedding, and the baby stories about both Violet and Harry. Violet added stories of her own, providing commentary when needed and laughed at the appropriate (and not so appropriate) parts. However, James noticed that although Harry added a couple of things, they were all incredibly recent, after his seventeenth birthday, and for most of it he just sat there and soaked it all in, as if committing it to memory when he should know them already.

But he didn’t want to think about that now. All he wanted to do was hold his children close to him and remember.

“You displease me, Wormtail.”

Wormtail’s hands shook terribly from his position on the ground, groveling in front of his master. His body twitched from the aftershocks of the Cruciatus –his punishment for Neville’s escape. However, many Death Eaters secretly regarded the mission as a minor success because young Draco Malfoy had redeemed himself by taking out Lily Potter, esteemed Auror and a great Mudblood pain in the arse. It made Wormtail’s blood curl every time he heard such labels pinned on Lily as they rejoiced in her death, but he couldn’t say anything to defend her. Not if he wanted to live.

He gritted his teeth as he desperately tried not to think about it. Lily was a good friend –as much of a sister as James is a brother. He’d never intended for the Potters to get hurt; and it had taken every ounce of self restraint not to magic Lily into the Floo Network when he had the chance.

Yet there was another reason why he’d risked appearing in front of the Dark Lord so soon after the incident. He had crucial information

that he hoped would bring him back into his Lord's good graces. Unfortunately, the Dark Lord had sent the Cruciatus on him the moment Wormtail stepped into the room, giving him no chance to try and spare himself a few seconds of intense pain.

"M –my Lord," Wormtail whimpered pathetically as he struggled to rise from his position on the floor. Nowadays, he wasn't used to being kicked around; he'd forgotten this feeling of submissive terror.

"Stay there like the rat you are," the Dark Lord said indifferently.

Wormtail quickly slumped to the floor but, forgetting his place, kept on persisting with having his say instead of patiently waiting to be addressed, like he would have done sixteen years ago.

But he didn't hold as much rank now as he did before. Now he was virtually useless, and being in the same house as Neville overnight had been a stroke of luck that Wormtail had wanted to use to gain some status amongst the Death Eaters again. He wasn't popular or particularly welcome, he knew that, but Peter cared about his friends. They were the only family he had left and he wanted to make sure they'd survive the war despite whichever side won. In all honestly, Peter wasn't sure whose side he was on anymore. He'd deliberately stayed out of the Order this second time to prevent temptation, but as Muggle killings rose and his friends became more in danger, he knew he had to do something. He'd almost watched them die last time, when he waited to deliver Lily and James last time. Peter had never forgiven himself for that terrible error, and was trying to make it up this time.

Too bad it didn't work, like most of Peter's efforts. His friends all had elite status in the both the Order and the Ministry. Even Remus was high up in the Order, despite being poor, and he was well liked and strong. It made Peter jealous sometimes, seeing the great things they got to do while he was stuck at a boring desk job, stamping approvals and filing various reports. But he considered it his own way of punishing himself for his mistakes in the past.

Still, Lily was dead, and he couldn't change that. Damn it, why did this have to happen? If Neville was taken, his request would have granted.

Peter had asked that the Potters, Remus, and Sirius be spared during and in the aftermath of the war, especially if the Dark Lord proved victorious. They'd be off limits to any Death Eater, under Peter's protection. However, he didn't count on Fenrir regarding him still too lowly to have his request granted, especially when Neville escaped. Now Lily was dead, and he still hadn't ensured their protection.

Peter closed his eyes, mourning for the sister whose lifeless eyes he had to close, for the grief this was putting James and the kids through. He should be there right now, at Grimmauld Place, but he had to do this, ensure that nobody else would die, even if one of the Order would be compromised.

"There's a spy amongst the Death Eaters!" Wormtail blurted.

Instantly, the Dark Lord's inner circle began muttering and whispering to each other while Voldemort's monstrous eyes remained impassive. "What proof of this is there?" he asked almost lazily.

"A letter I intercepted this morning at the Potter home prior to the attack," Wormtail explained, daring to look into Voldemort's eyes. The cold glimmer of interest in his eyes told Wormtail he had his permission to show the evidence. Carefully, Wormtail unfolded the piece of parchment, reading it aloud.

Death Eater attack at your house –get the bloody hell out of there NOW!

"I tried tracing it," Wormtail said after a few beats of silence. "No luck. The spy didn't seem to have a lot of time to send the message but managed to use a Dictation Charm to hide their handwriting and identity."

"Severus?" Voldemort said silkily. "Care to explain this?"

A hooded Snivellius looked up. "I can assure you I had nothing to do with this, My Lord," he said coldly.

For a moment the two just stared at each other as Voldemort assessed the truthfulness of Snape's statement. "Very well," he said

finally. "Wormtail, find out who this traitor is and consider yourself returned to the fold. Failure is unacceptable."

"Y –yes, m'Lord," Wormtail squeaked before high tailing it out of there.

As Wormtail hurried out of the chamber, quickly Apparating back to the friends who needed him, he failed to notice the hiding eavesdropper in his haste.

Draco Malfoy stepped out from the shadows, his face pallid with fear.

"Shit," he whispered. He and Professor Snape were in deep trouble now. Actually, Draco was, but by teaching him Occlumency and the art of being a spy, Snape was endangering himself as well. Merlin, he'd been so relieved when Snape approached him, seeing through his act of indifference right away. Not that surprising, actually; after all, Snape himself had been living a double life for so long; he would be able to spot that sort of thing right away, the old bat.

He'd been wondering where his letter went, though. Draco was immensely glad he had the presence of mind to use a Dictation Charm while quickly writing that warning; otherwise he wouldn't be standing here right now. But Draco had merely thought it hadn't reached them in time; he'd never dreamed that one of the infamous quartet of good-doers would betray the others.

Draco had to tell the Order. He hadn't known about Peter Pettigrew's presence among the Death Eaters until today, and hadn't really thought about it until this moment, obviously too wrapped up in other things. It took him a long time to get around the wards on that door though; he'd only caught the end, when Pettigrew announced that there was a spy. Luckily Pettigrew wasn't part of that council that hired Draco, or he'd already be dead. Still, even if he wasn't in a position of power in the Order, to delay getting that information to them any further would be dangerous. However, now that Pettigrew was looking for a spy, it might be safer to wait a bit before trying to contact them.

The door creaked open as the meeting concluded, sending Draco scurrying back around the corner, heading to his room. Walking hurt

his feet, and he was tired. Killing people really is exhausting, he thought bitterly. Every time he closed his eyes he saw Lily Potter's defiant eyes as Draco's Avada Kedavra ended her life.

Finally, he reached his room, tiredly throwing himself on the soft green covers. However, he found no comfort in them because recurring images of green light and eyes kept on plaguing him, despite being wide awake.

Draco glanced down at his traitorous hands. No blood there, just dirt underneath the fingernails. The guilt gnawing at him was unbearable; how could the rest of the Death Eaters, his father, who all killed almost daily, stand this feeling? How could they laugh, toast, and boast about their exploits knowing full well that someone is dead because of them? How could they enjoy it?

Before, when he was stupid and naïve, Draco thought he could do it. He thought about killing before, mused on how satisfying it'd be to break a Mudblood's neck, terminate the life of an enemy. The blood lust Fenrir was always going on about. He thought he hated the Potters on principle, but Draco knew now that killing was anything but satisfying; it made him sick to his stomach. And now that he'd been properly "initiated," he would be expected to kill more. He'll do it because he has to; and that thought terrified him.

"Draco?"

His senses snapped back to alert as he quickly rolled off the bed and stood up, embarrassed at being caught in such a vulnerably unprepared state.

"Yes, Father?" he asked stiffly. Father had tried to protect him back there; he wasn't sure why he did that though, and it bothered him. Draco didn't like being unable to see someone's motives.

Lucius hesitated, though no trace of uncertainty surfaced on his aristocratically aloof face. "I just came to see how you were doing. It was a tough day."

Draco nodded neutrally. He had to play it safe around Father; but then, he was used to it, so he supposed it didn't matter. Mother's been constantly worrying about him, there's no way he'd tell her he was a spy, because he didn't want to add more stress on her as well as the obvious reasons.

Father shifted, and a flash of discomfort crossed his face. His fingers tapped the cane he always carried with him, a sign that he was either irritated or anxious. But it was hard to believe Father as anxious about anything, so Draco assumed it was irritation.

"You can't leave."

"What?" Draco asked, frowning.

"The Death Eaters. It's a lifetime of service Draco . . . to attempt to leave would mean instant death. Have you heard of Regulus Black?"

"Black?"

"Sirius Black's younger brother. Do you know what happened to him?"

"No." Draco didn't like where this was going.

"He died, Draco. No one knows the full details, but he didn't like the work we did and tried to leave the Death Eaters. All of his potential taken away in an instant."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"To warn you. I can't say many positive things about Sirius Black, but he is brave, rashly so. Don't fall prey to cowardice like his brother did. Your mother would have a breakdown if anything happened. That's all."

And Lucius was gone as fast as he'd come.

Draco frowned deeply at the closed door, only one thing coming to mind.

What the hell?

“What about her sister? Daisy?”

“Petunia,” James corrected wearily. “Estranged sister. They haven’t spoken for two decades, but not because Lily didn’t try. She still sends Christmas cards to her even after all these years. Sent.”

Sirius hesitated. “I dunno, don’t you think she’d want to know? I mean, when Reg . . . when Regulus died I was angry about his stupidity for getting into the Death Eaters at all, but I wanted to know. It’d be worse if nobody told me.”

James forced himself to smile sympathetically. “Sorry Padfoot. Didn’t realize it’d still be a sore subject.”

“I agree with Sirius,” Remus said, taking the pen out of his mouth. “I think at the very least Petunia Dursley deserves to know, even if she refuses the invitation.”

James nodded in submission, rubbing his eyes. “I just hate that it has to be so soon. I’m not ready, Moony . . . I can’t say goodbye yet.”

Because of the ongoing war, the funeral had to be held three days after the attack; far too soon. But this was the only day available for months, and James knew he couldn’t bear having this burden on him for so long. So if it was too soon, then so be it. His family needed the closure. He supposed Petunia counted as Lily’s family, but in blood only. He glanced up at two of his best friends, people who have been there for him no matter what. Peter was a little bit more come and go, since he had to serve long hours at the Ministry and was reluctant to join the fight the second time, which was understandable, and Remus was constantly out on missions for the Order, but they were all there when it mattered. When Lily died.

But he’d rather not think about that right now. Focus on Petunia.

"It'll be awkward, that's for sure," James muttered. "She hates me. Always has from the very first day I met her. Not my fault she has a normality complex."

"I'll talk to her."

The three men turned around to find Harry and Violet standing in the door, both looking disheveled and extremely tired despite having slept for nearly twelve hours, emotionally drained.

"What?" Sirius asked.

Harry blinked sleepily. "I said I'll talk to her."

"Why?"

Harry shrugged. "Because I can."

James frowned, those creeping suspicions surfacing again. He knew he'd already been horrible to Harry, and he didn't want to make it worse, but given everything he had to consider it. Which meant he had to take Harry's warning about Peter seriously as well; but he knew about this business, and if Peter was indeed betraying them, arresting him and trying to coerce him to tell the truth won't do any good here. As long as they were careful about what they told him, they could stop whatever flow of information he might give Voldemort while trying to use it against him. He'll talk to Sirius and Remus privately soon, but right now they had a funeral to plan.

"It's okay Harry," James said. "I think I should be the one to talk to her."

Harry frowned, but he quickly morphed his face back into a neutral expression. Violet glanced worriedly in between the two of them before offering her opinion.

"Harry's her nephew," she pointed out, "and he's never met her before. Maybe she'll respond better than she would with you."

James shifted his gaze to Violet, who looked curiously defiant for some reason. Luckily, he didn't see Harry's surprised expression as he glanced at his sister with shocked eyes.

He thought about this for a moment. Vi did have a point. Petunia doesn't have anything against Harry yet, maybe seeing Lily's son might actually convince her to acknowledge her sister again.

"Okay," he said. "Harry can go."

Harry bit his lip as he strolled down the familiar sidewalk, hands stuck in his jeans pocket, not too nostalgic as he soaked in the epitome of suburbia; identical houses equally parted into two neat rows, white picket fences and perfectly trimmed lawns. However, Harry recognized the faint dent in the curve of the Dursley's driveway without even glancing at the gold "Four" emblazoned on the house. He knew well the various patches of lilies, petunias, daisies, and poppies lined up beneath the windowsill and along the path to the front porch, having meticulously weeded them in both cold rain and scorching shine.

Why did I volunteer again? Harry thought for the hundredth time that day. It's not like he was scared of coming back, just that he had no desire to –it's not like he owed the Dursleys anything.

But he did, in a way –despite whatever horrible mistreatment he had to endure under them, they did take him in. Even if they didn't love him, they still saved him from an orphanage, from possibly turning into the monster Voldemort became. Though they kept him in the cupboard under the stairs, they still gave him a home.

Now that he has a real family, actually known what it's like to have a mum, dad, and sister, he started wondering things that's never even crossed his mind before. Questions that were drilled out of his head from the very moment he crossed the traitorous welcome mat. Did Aunt Petunia come to the funeral the first time? Did she feel this grasping pain in her heart, that aching for something she couldn't have?

Did she care?

Ring. Harry stepped back and waited for someone to answer the door. Instinctively, he glanced around self consciously, just waiting to hear one of the neighbors point and whisper about that “dark, hoodlum Potter boy,” judging him like they always do. But he didn’t hear anything, couldn’t even feel eyes staring at his back. Here, he was nobody, just some random kid who was probably asking for a church donation or selling magazines for his school.

“I’ve got it, Vernon!” Aunt Petunia’s shrill voice called from beyond the thick wooden door. Harry couldn’t help but tense up as she opened it, unconsciously ready for an onslaught about how he neglected to weed the garden or cook breakfast for Dudley.

But when she opened the door, it was as if it were nothing. As if her estranged nephew wasn’t on her front porch.

Aunt Petunia didn’t even open the door completely before moving to close it again. “I don’t want to buy anything,” she said briskly.

“Wait!” Harry shouted, sticking his foot in the door. Aunt Petunia looked at his lodged foot with something akin to outrage as she looked at him –really looked at him.

Eyes narrowing in vague recognition, she stopped trying to squash Harry’s foot against the door and gripped the door frame tightly, her body stiff. “Who are you?” she hissed, suddenly hostile.

Harry got the feeling that she already knew the answer to that question.

“Petunia?” Uncle Vernon’s voice drifted from the kitchen. “Who is it?”

Aunt Petunia’s eyes met Harry’s as a brief understanding passed between them. “Just Mrs. Radcliffe from next door!” she answered, stepping out to the front porch and closing the door behind her. Eyeing Harry warily, she crossed her arms and kept a reasonable distance away from him. “You’re that Potter boy’s kid, aren’t you?” she whispered, eyes darting around as if looking for eavesdroppers. “Don’t –don’t do any of that funny stuff around here.”

"I'm not that stupid," Harry replied coldly. Merlin, she was still afraid of him. Of magic.

Aunt Petunia's nostrils flared like they always did when she felt insulted. "Why are you here? Shouldn't you be in your world, doing freaky things like you people do?"

"Glad you think we're people; that's an improvement," Harry shot back automatically. There was just something about seeing Aunt Petunia again that made all of his reflective conclusions go right out the window again.

Nostrils flared. "Where is she?" she asked stiffly. "Out canoodling with that Potter, too busy bothering someone else to come herself?"

She had gone too far, and Harry's temper was already on a short leash given recent events. Besides, there was something about the atmosphere of Privet Drive that just made his veins throb with indignant anger.

"No," he snapped, hands shaking in anger. How dare she insult Mum like that? Harry knew now that she didn't give a shit about her sister at all, probably didn't feel a thing when she was gone the first time.

"She's dead, you evil hag; Mum was murdered. Can't 'canoodle' anymore, can she?"

Aunt Petunia grew very still. There was no exclamation of surprise, no immediate apology and expression of sorrow; just stillness. She didn't faint or put a hand to her horsy mouth to stifle sobs; just looked straight at Harry instead of dismissing him, searching for truth in her sister's eyes. Finally, she seemed to understand and absorb this information, and Harry was surprised to see fear in her eyes. Aunt Petunia opened her mouth slowly to articulate her feelings on the news, but it wasn't what Harry was expecting.

"Oh. Is that so?" she said faintly, as if speaking from a distance.

Something snapped in Harry. “Oh? Is that all you have to say? My Mum, your sister’s dead, and that’s all –I can’t believe this. Give me one good reason not to hex you right now!”

He felt so hollow right now. Here was one person who should be one of the people most affected by Mum’s death and here she is, the epitome of apathy and Voldemort’s policy of prejudice. Screw shock and sadness, for the first time Harry truly felt angry. He was angry at the pure, unjustified unfairness about the way Mum was taken from them, for how he himself couldn’t do anything to prevent it, and that everything seemed to be happening all over again. Everyone he cares about dies and leaves him feeling emptier than ever.

But there’s no Death Eaters around, no Voldemort or even Snape to take his anger out on, just Aunt Petunia, the cold matron who couldn’t even look at Harry without a sneer. Deep down, Harry knew he shouldn’t, that he should control himself and think about what he was doing, but he didn’t want any of that right now. He wanted to hurt, to make someone else experience the pain he was feeling right now. He wanted to break Aunt Petunia’s icy exterior and make her realize that her sister’s gone forever, and that her “Sisters Now and Forever” means nothing now.

“She put it up, you know,” he said dangerously quietly, savoring the surprised look on Aunt Petunia’s face. “The ornament. Every Christmas, high up in front of the tree, so everyone could see it.”

“She –she did?” Aunt Petunia asked weakly.

“Yeah, she did,” Harry said harshly. “More than you ever did. She still loved you, no matter how much of a –an awful sister you were.”

Aunt Petunia broke out of her trance at those words, looking helpless and confused.

“How did you know that?”

“I’m a freak, Aunt Petunia, how else do you think?”

"You've been spying on us," Aunt Petunia accused, eyes briefly flashing with anger.

"No, I just know that you don't give a damn about any of us. I know you're an awful mother who ignores the fact that her ickle Dudders is an elephant, that he's a bully who terrorizes the neighborhood kids and enjoys it. I know you hate me, Mum, and probably Dad and Vi too. I know that if you adopted me, it'd be in the cupboard under the stairs for me until magic scared you into actually treating me like a human being." Harry's fists balled as he tried to keep himself in check; he was just short of pulling his wand out and hexing Aunt Petunia for all the injustices he suffered under her, the way she didn't care that her sister just died.

Aunt Petunia didn't flinch throughout Harry's speech, didn't make a single movement that would have shown that his words had cut her as deeply as they did. But her weak, vulnerable voice, the same sorrow that possessed her that night seven years ago as Harry watched her mourn her sister's death returned, showing more than any wailing could have.

"I don't hate her," she whispered.

"Why don't you ever say her name, then?" Harry demanded half heartedly, the fire that prompted him to insult and injure waning quickly. How could he possibly further hurt someone who looked that vulnerable, that human?

"Don't ask that question," she ordered, her voice tightening.

"Why?" Harry asked curiously. "Does it hurt too much to say her name, are you ashamed of her? Or —" he stopped, eyes widening with realization. "Are you jealous of Mum?"

Aunt Petunia's eyes flashed with life again. "Get out," she said quietly. "I don't want to see you here again freak."

Harry's mouth dropped open. How could she have changed moods so quickly?

“Get out!” she hissed, enraged.

“Gladly,” Harry said coldly, any sympathy he had held for his aunt lost. “Here’s your invitation to the funeral. Come, if you loved her. Otherwise don’t bother.”

Ideally, Harry would have walked away feeling satisfied that he had given Aunt Petunia exactly what was coming to her. But if this were an ideal situation, he wouldn’t be coming to her at all, bearing news about her sister’s death. He would be enjoying the aftermath of Christmas with his family, clinking glasses and exchanging stories while sitting by the fire as they chatted about meaningless things.

Instead, he trudged along the familiar path again, confused and feeling as if he’d accomplished nothing.

“We have gathered here to mourn the loss of a beloved wife, mother, friend, and comrade. Lily Potter was —”

Harry sat behind the man speaking with the rest of his family, along with Sirius and Remus, who were basically family. He’d been suspicious of Wormtail’s absence, and kept on scanning the crowd, looking for him so he could rip him apart limb by limb.

James had initially wanted it to be a small, private funeral, but Lily was well loved, and many of their former classmates and her coworkers also wanted to come, so they increased the size.

Harry was starting to get really sick of funerals. Like Dumbledore’s service, the speech about Mum’s life sounded so generalized, so impersonal. Several people who actually knew Lily were going to speak, including James, but it made his stomach churn listening to this man. He hated this. He hated how he lost his Mum right when he found her again, hate the fact that it hurt so much knowing she was dead. Before he came here, it was a fact that she was dead, that she and James both died years ago, when he was one. But now she wasn’t a fact, but reality, and seeing the devastation her death brought on so many people just made this burning in his heart grab on to him tighter.

No one else is going to die because of this stupid destiny, not even if it wasn't his.

The funeral flew by quickly to Harry, his mind in a complete haze of thoughts, of guilt and determination. People stood at the podium, talked, and sat back down. As hard as he tried, Harry just couldn't pay attention to the talking, all the sobs and crying and mourning. Unease filled him and all he wanted to do was get up and do something. He knew Mum wouldn't want anyone to have a breakdown over her, but use it to drive them to increase their efforts in the war, to make sure nothing like this ever happened again.

He almost couldn't bear it; the open coffin seemed like such a long distance away from him. He didn't want to say goodbye, it was too soon, too sad to even try to comprehend it yet. But he took a deep breath as he approached Mum's coffin, the lily he held in his trembling hands giving him strength. Familiar guilt swirled around in his stomach, making him feel nauseous.

"I love you, Mum," he said quietly. "Glad to have been able to tell you that in person, finally. I'm sorry for letting this happen, I –I'm not going to let anyone else die. Thank you for showing me that, and for my first Christmas, even if it was cut short. When I beat Voldemort –it'll be for you. Goodbye."

Carefully, Harry placed the lily next to Mum's head. Almost deliriously, he thought it was a nice contrast to her hair before realized that this would be the last time he'd ever look at that hair, at the face that seemed kind and peaceful even in death. Harry sniffed, but found his eyes empty of tears. Mum wouldn't want him to be destroyed over her death.

She'd want him to fight.

Violet passed him on the way back to his seat, and they glanced at each other briefly. He wasn't surprised to find tears absent in his sister's eyes as well; like everyone close to Mum, they had already been spent.

Finally, after many mourners took their turn to say goodbye, after that hollow coffin was closed and laid into the ground, it was over, and Harry was already planning his course of action for the minute he returned from school, all the information Professor Dumbledore gave him swirling in his mind as he tried to figure out what to do.

“Harry? Harry.”

“What?” Harry asked, snapping out of his thoughts.

Violet narrowed her eyes, clearly displeased with his lack of attention. “It’s over. We need to go to the reception.”

“Oh,” Harry said distractedly.

“What’s going on?” she asked suspiciously. “You’ve been staring off in space during the whole thing, don’t you care that this is Mum’s funeral?”

“That’s not fair,” Harry snapped as everyone slowly gravitated away from them, leaving the siblings alone. “I was just thinking. Preferred that to listening to that bloke drone on about someone he doesn’t know, like with Professor Dumbledore.”

Violet nodded, looking sobered. “Sorry,” she muttered, “but, I dunno, every time you do that, it’s like you’re not here. It just reminds me that I’m –” Violet paused, cutting herself off mid sentence, suddenly self conscious.

“You’re what?”

“That to you, I don’t . . . exist.”

Damn sentimentality, Harry thought half heartedly as that ache in his heart came back full force. He didn’t really realize just how hard it must be for her to accept that, how much she trusted him to believe the impossible.

"You exist to me. I know you now; I think that's enough. Too bad I missed the days when you were little and cute though," Harry joked, attempting to lighten the mood.

Both siblings offered weak smiles at that, but their hearts weren't in it. It was supposed to be a somber day after all. Harry had forgotten that during the actual funeral, but maybe for him this was the type of thing better appreciated in silence, with just the bitter wind reminding them of what they've lost.

They hadn't had much time to talk after that day, too busy with the funeral and trying to reconcile their feelings and with Violet's discovery about her brother. They stared at each other for a moment like two opponents sizing each other up.

"I saw Mum's sister here today," Violet noted, giving Harry a significant look.

Harry found it odd that she didn't call her "Aunt Petunia" but she'd never been a figure in Violet's life, so why would she bear a title?

"Oh, really?" He really was surprised; Harry didn't think she'd show. He had stopped paying attention to the mourners after the Marauders finished their goodbyes.

Violet nodded. "Yeah, she was one of the very last ones. She wasn't crying, but she was devastated."

"Devastated?" Harry asked skeptically, remembering Aunt Petunia's reaction when he gave her the invitation.

"She didn't wail like some of the others did, and she didn't say much, but you could tell. You just know."

Harry nodded. He could understand that.

"Did you like her, in your . . .?" Violet asked, unable to actually say it.

"Not really," Harry responded truthfully. "She didn't exactly like me either, so I guess it worked out."

Violet blinked, sensing the hurt that was hidden under the layers of Harry's words. "Not exactly the most loving environment was it?" she asked quietly. "Were they awful?"

"Yeah," Harry grunted. "But I suppose I should be grateful; I could have been worse off than them. At least they could be threatened with magic." At least Aunt Petunia was Mum's sister.

"You don't deserve them," Violet stated confidently. "But I suppose you wouldn't quite be the same if you had been raised by someone else, right? I mean, Harry –my Harry – is different than you." Violet frowned, as if just realizing something. "You know, it's strange; I don't think of it as being two Harrys. It's just . . . you. A you before and after. But you all the same. I –I don't think 'my' Harry is gone; he's just a more immature you, I guess."

Violet's logic gave him a headache, but he did agree with her on one thing. Looking now at the Boy-Who-Lived here, Neville, and how he was weaker than his counterpart because he grew up in the spotlight, manipulated and showcased, Harry realized that growing up with the Dursleys did at least save him from that.

Still, he wouldn't have traded that if he had the chance to grow up with his family, his Mum, Dad, and sister.

"C'mon, we've got to get back to the reception," Violet said, "or Dad'll get worried."

Harry nodded as the two of them walked off to the Floo, the grass crushing somberly beneath them. However, Harry felt compelled to look back one more time at his mother's grave and could have sworn he saw a glimmer of a red haired woman leaning on her gravestone, watching her children walk away. Harry blinked several times to try and get this apparition out of his head, and when he opened his eyes again, it was gone.

Must have been the trick of the light, he concluded, but as he and Violet joined Dad at the fireplace, throwing the powder into the fire, Harry couldn't shake the feeling that what he saw was real.

But he thought no more about it as he went spiraling down the Floo network, spinning and turning while licked by green fire.

As he clumsily stumbled out of the fireplace, he noticed that many of the mourners had also come to the reception, though it appeared that Aunt Petunia chose not to come. Still no sign of Wormtail, though. Harry narrowed his eyes as he scanned the crowd for the traitor, but his search was abruptly ended by a pair of arms that were suddenly thrown around his shoulders.

“Ginny?” he asked, surprised. He hadn’t seen her at the funeral, but then, he hadn’t really paid attention for the most part.

“Sorry for attacking you like that,” she muttered, suddenly embarrassed. “I’ve just been worried.” Ginny smiled at him, a sad, familiar smile of someone who knew exactly what you were feeling at the moment. It was then that Harry remembered that Bill died here, that death has always been a tender subject for the Weasleys, who may lose a family member or two by the end of the hard war. Here, they already have.

But from Ginny, he didn’t hear a single awkward “I’m sorry for your loss,” and he was sure he loved her for that. It was nice to have someone know that silent understanding spoke more than words.

“Harry!”

Both Harry and Ginny turned around at the familiar voice; sure enough, bushy brown hair was visible as Hermione pushed her way through the crowd to her fellow Hogwarts students.

“I –” Hermione stopped. “I read about . . . it in the obituaries. I’m sorry.” Then, looking extremely awkward, she pulled Harry into a hug.

“Oh, er –thanks,” Harry responded, patting Hermione on the back. “For coming, I mean. Both of you. It means a lot.”

And it did. He didn't think he'd ever been more touched by anything than this simple act of just coming. It was something their counterparts definitely would have done.

With a whoosh behind them, the rest of the Potter family arrived at the reception, the quietest of everyone present. They'd all said goodbye, but felt Lily's presence with them more than ever.

They smiled weakly at each other in encouragement before splitting off to greet guest after guest, patiently accepting the sympathies of those who couldn't fully understand the cost of war on the Potters, in both worlds.

Peter waited until Harry, Violet, and James had all entered the Floo before daring to approach Lily's grave. He couldn't bear to actually attend the funeral, knowing it was his fault, but he couldn't just notsay goodbye. So he decided that he do it in private, with only the dirt and sky as his witnesses. And after this, he'd be able to concentrate fully on his investigation into the spy in the Dark Lord's ranks, to save the others, Peter convinced himself.

He blinked back tears he didn't know he could shed as he approached Lily's grave.

"You understand, right? Lily, you know I never meant for anything to happen to you. I was a coward, but I'm fixing it. I'm going to make sure nothing happens to James or Sirius or Remus or the kids. You won't have died in vain. I'm sorry, Lily, goodbye."

Peter wiped his eyes and turned around, prepared to start his investigation before a familiar, chilling voice made him pause.

"You do realize just how ironic your little eulogy is, right?"

No, he thought, his body freezing, No, it can't be . . . it's not possible!

Very slowly, Peter grabbed his wand out of his pocket and spun around, brandishing it at the speaker.

“Now really Peter,” Lily Potter said dryly. “I’ve already died twice because of you. Do you really think you can do it a third time now that I’m already gone?”

“Wh –what?” he stuttered. “T –twice?”

Lily smirked mischievously. “Yes, Peter, twice. But you wouldn’t understand, so I won’t bother to explain it.” She pushed off her own tombstone, her high heels barely making any sound as she briskly crossed the dirt that separated them.

“Stay away from me ghost!” Peter shrieked, positioning his wand threateningly in front of her. This was not happening, this was not happening.

Lily cocked an eyebrow at the wand in her face. “If I were a ghost, you wouldn’t be able to do anything to me. But I’m not. Well, I suppose that’s about the most accurate way to describe what I am, but it’s not exact.”

“Then you’re an imposter,” Peter sneered, hypocritically finding that someone was impersonating Lily to be highly insulting to her memory. “The Lily Potter I know would never choose to be a ghost.”

For the first time, Lily looked very somber. “You’re right about that,” she said quietly. “I’d miss James too much, and who knows when I’d wrap up my unfinished business? Too many ‘ifs’ in that equation to try and complicate things. It’s like that half-life that your dear master seems to hold on to.”

Peter, for one, was extremely confused about what was going on, and he didn’t like where this was going. She wasn’t a ghost, she wasn’t an imposter, what the bloody hell was she? And since she seems to know much more than she should, what was safe for Peter?

Lily shrugged. “But I didn’t come here to chat, although I daresay we’ll be seeing each other soon, Peter. James and I loved you like a brother, and you betrayed us . . . I’ll never forget that, and you know me. Stubborn to a fault.”

“Hold on for one second!” Peter shouted. If he let her get away, she could go around blabbing the fact that he was a Death Eater to everyone, and then they’d be prompted to try and remove the complex glamour charms meant to hide his Dark Mark from his friends, charms that the Dark Lord himself had placed on it years ago.

“Don’t worry, Peter, your double life is safe for now. It doesn’t factor into my plans to have you exposed yet,” Lily said, ignoring Peter’s attempts to Stun her, for the red lights merely passed through her body as it would a ghost’s. Instead, she started muttering to herself under her breath, deep in thought. “What did Albus say to do again? I can’t hold a wand . . . oh, there it is.”

Lily blinked as a blue streak sailed clear through her forehead, frowning. “That’s not very nice, Peter.” She sighed. “But it doesn’t matter if I teach you – again – about proper manners. You’re not still slurping your soup, are you?”

“Why won’t it matter?” Peter asked suspiciously, covertly reaching for the invisible Dark Mark on his left arm to call for help.

“Because you won’t remember the last seven minutes.”

Snap.

“Stay out of trouble, and –and if anyone starts asking you questions about . . .” James trailed off, unable to finish his sentence.

“If anyone asks you about the news article and you feel uncomfortable, just hex them,” Sirius finished resolutely.

“Padfoot!” Remus exclaimed disapprovingly.

Sirius shrugged. “It works, and if the buggers don’t have the brains for subtlety then they deserve it.”

Lily, who had been standing off to the side, chuckled at Sirius’s comment. Oh, how she’d missed him, this happier Sirius untainted by Azkaban. Grimly, she looked around at the group, knowing it was dangerous to be standing right next to them but unable to resist. They were all here together, her family. They’ve all suffered, haven’t they, with their personal demons along with society’s prejudices?

Invisible to their eyes, she could observe them all without reserve. So that’s how James would look if he’d lived seventeen years more. Still looks good, Lily thought, smiling mischievously to herself, Hair’s still impossible, though.

Remus looked younger, something that didn’t surprise Lily. Pranking and monthly adventures with the Marauders were the only things that really allowed him to have a childhood, but nearly two decades all alone hadn’t done any good to her Remus. This one, however –she wished she could mesh them together somehow, but knew it wasn’t her place to mess with this any more than she already had.

Once Harry and Violet boarded the Express, Lily tried to stay as close to them as she could, eventually sitting down in their compartment of choice, albeit a good distance away from their window seat. She briefly let her eyes rest as she struggled to retain her energy. Trying to stay unseen was exhausting; it would have been easier if she had situated herself in a bathroom stall or something, but she had not wanted to miss this opportunity to really see her son.

Over the years, she'd watched him struggle through life and try to deal with the responsibility placed upon his shoulders, responsibility that she regretted she couldn't help him with. But Lily had never been this close; she had never had the opportunity to touch her baby again, run her hands through the trademark Potter hair he had the misfortune to inherit.

It was so hard, watching him, but she knew she couldn't reveal herself. Not yet. It wasn't the right time.

Merlin, Lily felt so manipulative doing this, but as much as she trusted her son's judgment, the consequences of him choosing the wrong direction would be dire and affect more people than he could ever imagine.

So she sat back and watched as other kids came and went from the compartment, her eyes never straying from Harry. She had wanted to see him smile, and although Violet was doing a good job of trying to, Harry wasn't making much of an effort. Instead, he looked out the window, arms crossed with a pensive expression on his face, occasionally glancing almost mournfully at his friends.

Lily smiled sadly. She would do anything to reverse time and give him a real childhood, where he'd be laughing happily along with everyone else instead of making the decisions she was sure he was making – the right one, the hard road.

Knowing that her time was limited, Lily watched him, absorbed every part of her son who she wasn't able to watch grow up, guide to adulthood, comfort when he hurt. Some version of them had, in that graveyard during the Triwizard Tournament, but that was only a memory. It wasn't really them, not truly.

"We should get our robes on," a bushy haired brunette said quietly, glancing with worry at Harry.

Lily recognized the brunette as Hermione, though this version seemed to be much more timid than the original. She realized the extent of the damage the war caused, not only on her son, but on

everyone. They all looked exhausted despite the smiling façade they were upholding, especially this place's Boy-Who-Lived.

Neville was sitting even further apart from the group than Harry, fiddling with his wand almost carelessly. Like Harry, he would glance back at the group, but his face was contorted with shame and self-loathing. Something must have happened in the battle, before Lily had been able to come to this place.

Finally, the Hogwarts Express screeched to a stop, bringing back seven years worth of memories, of friends and enemies, of fights and make ups, of love and hate. Again, Lily wished James had been able to come with her; she felt so alone as she trailed Harry's group of friends, panicking slightly when she realized that she would have to sit through someone in order to get to Hogwarts.

But she felt exhausted from the effort of staying invisible, so instead opted for an emptier carriage, where she could have one seat to herself. Still, she was forced to listen to the two occupants' excessive giggling and gossiping. Their happiness didn't seem right to her after all that had happened. At the same time, she supposed she had no right to ask for people who couldn't possibly know.

As soon as they reached Hogwarts, Lily immediately went searching for Harry. I've turned into James, Lily thought wryly as she continued to stalk her son. For a moment, she actually made contact with him, her hand briefly going through his arm.

Harry turned around rapidly, a strange, warm feeling on his arm. Squinting suspiciously at the corridor, he couldn't help but shiver. Ever since Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ he had the nagging feeling that someone was watching him. Wormtail couldn't possibly be here, could he? No, he'd have no reason to, and he has appearances to keep up, a normal job.

He balled his fists to release some of the anger that even thinking about Wormtail stirred up. Dad was supposed to start on an investigation, he had promised, but that doesn't mean Harry was going to relax at Hogwarts and do nothing.

A profound sense of loss overtaking him with each step to the Great Hall, Harry tried to absorb as much as he could –the open sky, the buzz of excitement and anticipation, the rich smell of the House Elves' cooking. Soon, he would be in the places furthest from home, and will need those memories to keep him going.

He was going to finish what he started –alone.

Harry was extremely tempted to say goodbye to Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Violet at the very least. But he supposed it'd be easier on both sides if he didn't. He didn't want there to be any chance of them trying to convince him out of it. He was pretty sure that Violet would lock him up in the Room of Requirement until Dad got there if she did find out he was leaving, and he can't afford that delay.

So after he and Hermione had finished their Head duties and celebrated in the Common Room with Gryffindor for the last time, Harry had laid awake in his four poster bed as the gentle snores around him grew more frequent. Finally, at one in the morning, Harry placed a silencio charm on his shoes to avoid waking up his dormmates, grabbed his trunk, and quietly made his way downstairs. No one in their right mind would still be up this late the first night before classes.

"I knew it."

Harry turned around swiftly, wand out, recognizing the voice immediately.

Violet looked like she wanted to murder him.

"You bastard," she snarled. "How –you bloody –what gives you the right to leave now of all times?"

An angry, feral flashing in her eyes, Violet stepped directly in front of her brother, arms crossed with the intention that Harry would not get pass her.

“Don’t make me hex you, Vi,” Harry said seriously. “You don’t understand; I need to go, for Mum, for all the people who’ve died for me.”

Violet cocked an eyebrow. “What makes you think Mum died only for you?”

Harry bit back a frustrated groan. He really didn’t want to have to stun Violet, but if she forced him to . . . “I’m not saying that,” he said. “But as great as it is to finally get to know my family, I’ve still got a responsibility to everyone; not just here, but where I came from. Mum and Dad, Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore . . . they all died, but no more. As much as I hate to say it, you wouldn’t understand. Move.”

“Leave it to Neville,” Violet said, but now there was a note of desperation in her voice. “Please, Harry, I don’t want you to die.”

That stung, made his heart constrict with guilt, but Harry had to brush her feelings aside. “You know as well as I do that Neville’s not ready; he’ll lose, and then what’ll happen?”

“We’ll fight it,” Violet argued fiercely. “You say it’s your responsibility, but it’s not, Harry, not here, not when I need you!”

Harry shook his head. “I can’t stay for you, Vi, as much as I’d like to. Everyone I care about dies eventually, and I can’t let that happen to you –not when I don’t have a version of you to look forward to in my world.”

“Bloody hell, Harry, stop being so selfish!” Violet shrieked, tears springing in her eyes as common sense completely left her argument.

“No,” he said quietly. “You don’t know me.”

Violet flinched.

“I’m not trying to brag,” Harry continued. “But I’ve gone through a hell of a lot because of Voldemort, stuff that Neville’s faced. But I’m lucky, and I’ve got an idea of how to destroy him once and for all, and that’s something I’ve been trying to forget. I thought –I thought maybe I

could be normal here, have a real family and all that, you know? But Mum dying woke me up, because even here, when I'm not even officially the Boy-Who-Lived, people around me die, and that's got to stop. I –I can't imagine what it'd be like if you, Dad, Ginny, Hermione, Ron –any of them– died."

He looked up to see if Violet absorbed this, wanting her to understand why he's leaving, but all he found on her face was utter confusion.

"Boy-Who-Lived?" she said weakly. "You mean Neville's not the Boy-Who-Lived where you're from? Oh, of course, Mum and Dad died when you were one; that means they were the ones Voldemort attacked, and not the Longbottoms."

"The Longbottoms still didn't fare very well," Harry said sadly. "They were tortured to insanity."

"What?" Violet said, glancing at the staircase that lead to the boy's dormitory. "And Neville?"

"Stayed with his Gran, but visits his parents in the hospital."

Violet's shoulders slumped. "Poor Neville," she said.

"Don't you see?" Harry pressed. "This is why I have to go."

But where he expected reluctant acceptance, he got fierce determination. "Then I'm coming with you," Violet said stubbornly.

"No!" Harry snapped. "You're not taking that risk."

"You really think you're going to beat Voldemort by yourself?" Violet retorted. "You need all the help you can get, including from the current Boy-Who-Lived. It's his responsibility anyway; it's bout time he gets his arse up and does something."

"Not when he's going to get himself killed," Harry argued. "You know what? Stupefy. Sorry," he added at Violet's shocked expression. "But I've got to go. Tell Dad I'm sorry too."

But before he could take another step further, a warm, familiar voice stopped him. "I don't think you should do that."

Harry froze and turned around, not sure if he was surprised at this strange turn of events. It seems like the whole world was against him.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," he groaned as his twice deceased mother stood in front of him, careful to avoid Violet's stunned figure on the floor.

"Hello, Harry," she said, a warm, almost longing smile on her face. But Harry didn't buy this for one second; why did everything have to complicate itself whenever he made a simple choice?

Suddenly, realizing Violet's vulnerability, Harry quickly muttered the counter charm, allowing her to scuttle backwards towards Harry as if burned. To his relief, she had the presence of mind not to start yelling at Harry for stunning her; instead, she stood up slowly and drew her wand, an unreadable expression on her face.

"This probably isn't the best time for this, but I had to stop you," Lily explained.

"See, Harry, even the imposter thinks you shouldn't go," Violet commented sarcastically.

"I'm not an imposter," Lily said gently, not wanting to scare them.

"Bollocks," Violet said darkly before shooting red Stunners at her. Lily didn't even blink as the sparks went right through his chest. "Good aim," she commented. "Most people who go for the heart usually miss, hit the lungs or something."

Violet smiled at the irony, hiding her confusion. "Taught by the best," she said.

Harry watched this with increasing unease. If she truly was a ghost – and as far as he knew ghost couldn't shape shift – then she must be Lily Potter. But why wait until now to show up, and why did she seem

detached, almost as if she didn't quite know them?

"It won't work," Lily said as another streak of red passed through her. "Might as well stop before someone wakes up and investigates."

"What kind of spell is this?" Violet demanded. "How –are –you –transparent?" Each word was emphasized with multicolored sparks, now just magical bursts of anger and frustration.

But Harry was pretty sure that there were no spells that could make someone ghost-like, if that was what she really was. It was hard enough having to grapple with his Mum's death without a ghost popping into his life. He'd wished it when Sirius had died, but now he knows better.

"Lily Potter, your Mum," she said to Harry softly before turning to Violet. "Yours, too, I suppose, though regrettably you never got the chance to . . ."

"What, live?" Violet snapped. "So you're not from here, are you?"

"No," Lily said sadly. "I'm not."

"Am I supposed to believe that you're the Lily Potter who died sixteen years ago?" Harry asked skeptically.

Lily shrugged. "You can choose to believe whatever you want. There's no way to prove anything either way."

If Violet hadn't already tried it, Harry would have shot a good hex just for her –whoever she was– complicating the situation. But it wasn't, not if he chose to pretend this wasn't happening and get on his bloody way already.

"Yeah, well, have fun with your sodding puzzles," Harry said sarcastically. "But I'm leaving, and there's nothing either of you can say about it. Especially you," he added, glaring pointedly at Lily.

To his surprised, she looked almost hurt by his attitude, but the look soon dropped away to neutrality.

“What are you going to do, Harry?” Lily asked quickly; there was no physical way for her to keep Harry from going yet, but perhaps she could persuade him.

“Where does it look like?’ Harry stopped, never breaking his determined stride.

Lily stepped through him –did that feel weird– and startled him enough not to take another step. “Look, I want you to go, and obviously you want you to go, but until you’re ready or at the very least knowing what the bloody hell you’re doing.”

“Find the Horcruxes, save the day, and all that good stuff,” Harry retorted sarcastically, sidestepping Lily to avoid that unpleasant feeling again.

Lily groaned. “Teenagers. D’you know where the Horcruxes are, how to destroy them? You’re actually thinking of doing this by yourself?”

Harry stopped with one foot in the portrait hole. “Alone’s safer for everyone else,” he said before his figure was lost in the dark.

“Lovely,” Lily muttered. “My own son won’t listen to me.”

“Can you blame him?”

Lily turned to Violet, an unreadable expression on her face. “I suppose he doesn’t think me a threat,” Lily concluded, “if he left you here with me.”

“Yeah, well, we all know Harry’s a little daft,” Violet snapped, eyes guarded.

“Like I said, you don’t have to believe me. But it’d make my job a lot easier if you did.”

“Job?”

“Helping Harry. I couldn’t be there when he was growing up, but I’m here now. Believe me, no one wants this war to end more than James and me.”

“What, so you can live your happy little lives while people are dying out there?” Violet demanded, thinking of Neville and the Ministry’s manipulation of him.

Lily’s eyes narrowed dangerously, and for a second, Violet felt truly afraid as she gripped her wand spastically despite knowing that, logically, there was nothing the ghost could do to her.

“I’m already dead,” Lily growled. “Don’t lecture me about sacrifices. I gave up my son, my cause, my life in order to save him. You don’t know what it’s like to watch everything falling apart before it happens, realizing that you have all of this information but can do nothing about it. People have died, and I have seen their murderers planning out the attack. The best we can do is maybe get into some dreams and send a warning, but that opportunity is very rare, and even then most don’t listen. No, you don’t know at all.”

But she was wrong. Violet had watched as the Ministry slowly but surely attached strings to Neville’s arms, head, and heart. He was a puppet, but he was too damn stubborn –or stupid– to notice.

However, even when she had seen all of this, she’d done nothing, gave Neville no real warning, only disgust and distance. By being angry at his helplessness, this childhood friend she’d held in as high a regard as her big, strong, brother, she’d pushed him away. By hating him for his vulnerabilities, for not being strong enough, she condemned him.

Maybe, if she’d said something, Neville wouldn’t be hiding.

“Tell me,” Violet said suddenly. “Give me that information and I’ll make sure Harry gets it.”

Lily looked surprised at her proposal, but shook her head. “No, you won’t be able to catch him.”

“There’s a spell, finding a blood relative with your own blood.”

The older woman’s eyes widened as she took a stern step forward. “That’s Dark Magic . . . where’d you find it?”

“Grimmauld Place’s library,” Violet said defiantly, crossing her arms.

“No Dark Arts for my kids,” Lily reprimanded.

Violet’s expression dropped from irritated to a strange sort of blankness. “Mum used to say that,” she muttered.

“Well, she’s right,” Lily responded softly, looking slightly disturbed by her own words.

Violet peered at her suspiciously. “You know, I’m starting to think maybe you’re not lying.”

Lily sighed in relief. “Good, then this’ll go quicker. We’ve got to find the people Harry intended on taking with him originally, even if they are a bit different than their counterparts, and convince them to aid Harry on this. He won’t be able to do this alone; Voldemort is counting on his sense of heroism—he’ll expect Harry do this without help.”

“How would you know that? I mean, you weren’t exactly dead when Voldemort set the traps right?” Violet asked before a sudden realization hit her. “Merlin. Diagon Alley. He was changing the traps, wasn’t he?”

Lily nodded. “Moving the Horcrux, I think. That’s what the raid was about; it certainly wasn’t a random attack.”

“But –but people were killed!” Violet hissed. “We were almost crushed under the buildings!”

“That’s why they’re the bad guys,” Lily said quietly. “But then again, sometimes the good guys do horrible things in the name of righteousness.” There was a sting of bitterness in her voice. “Fudge

was here in this . . . place, wasn't he? Well, there's a perfect example of a well meaning man who let power go to his head, and started controlling the lives of the people around him with little regard to the effect his foolish refusal to see the truth would have in the long run."

"Even Peter betrayed our trust because he thought he was protecting us," Lily's eyes suddenly flashed with anger and hurt. Merlin, it was infuriating to see her old friend standing by her grave, trying to make up excuses for everything he's done. It took all of Lily's self restraint to just wipe his memory instead of offing him right then and there. Not that it would really do any good, but it sure as hell would have made her feel better.

"Uncle Peter?" Violet asked, confused. There was a sinking feeling in her stomach as she was lurched back into Christmas Day, when amidst the chaos someone had voiced an inquiry as to Uncle Peter's whereabouts. He'd shown up the same day at Order Headquarters, explaining how he'd escaped to try and contact the Order, but they'd already gotten wind of it thanks to their appearance with the help of the Portkey.

Now that she really thought about it, it seemed fishy. It didn't seem like it at the time, but now, realizing how he'd gone to the loo just a half hour before the attack happened, it seemed so probable. But no, it was Uncle Peter for Merlin's sake! And Harry would have said something if he knew. Or maybe he was too preoccupied to tell her, or forgot that she didn't know . . .

"No," Violet said, shaking her head. "Uncle Peter wouldn't do that to us. He's –he's always been there, ever since the First War!"

"Not everything is what it seems," Lily said, quoting one of Violet's Mum's favorite sayings.

"So that means you might not really be a ghost," Violet accused. "You could be a Death Eater who made yourself like this to –to mess with us, or with Neville."

“There isn’t a way to make yourself a ghost unless you wish it,” Lily responded. “But you’re right, at any rate –I’m not a ghost. A spirit, perhaps.”

“Aren’t those the same thing?” Violet asked skeptically.

“No, there are subtle differences.” Lily sighed. “What will it take for you to help me? It’ll benefit everyone –both Harry and Neville included.”

Violet was silent for a moment as she processed this. “Tell me the truth,” she said finally. “What you really are, no avoiding the question with ‘perhaps’ or ‘maybe,’ but a solid answer. Where’d you come from, why you’re here, besides that stupid vague answer ‘helping Harry,’ and how. Especially that, because I think you know exactly how both you and Harry got here, but why you’re not telling him is beyond me.”

Lily regarded Violet with a slight smile on her lips, a bit of pride in her eyes. “You’re sharp. I guess –er– I raised you properly, then.”

Cocking an eyebrow, Violet responded, “You’re dancing around it again.”

To Violet’s surprise, Lily laughed. “All right, but you’ve got to make a promise of your own. Don’t tell Harry, or anyone else, no matter how much you want to. It’s dreadfully important that he doesn’t know, else everything will be for nothing.”

Violet hesitated, unsure if it was really wise to give her word to someone who could potentially be a threat. But, she supposed, she could always break her promise if she felt the need to. “Okay, I promise.”

Lily nodded in approval before carefully scanning Violet’s face, trying to decide how she should go about telling something potentially devastating. She sighed.

“You should probably sit down for this.”

Neville was walking down the hallway, searching for the “treasure” Mrs. Potter had set out for them. Somewhere along the way he’d lost

track of Harry and Violet, but felt safe enough in the Potter residence not to be too concerned about it.

Darkness filled his vision, the only audible sound being the aggressive pit, pat of the rain above. Neville never liked rain –he had always covered his ears with his pillow during rainstorms, but he had no security now. Nervously, he looked around at the darkness, what once seemed neutral now sinister.

He once asked Gran why he was so afraid of the rain. She responded with a shrug, but mentioned that it was raining the night his parents died.

It was ridiculous; he couldn't even remember that night, save for a flash of green light that regularly plagued his dreams. Sometimes he wondered if it was a weakness, being afraid of a force so natural, so unpredictable as rain. But then again, if he believed that, then he would not be afraid of death, the one thing that scared him the most after his Gran.

Neville squeaked as he heard rustling to his right. Now thoroughly spooked, he tried to reassure himself that he was in the Potter house, that Mr. and Mrs. Potter were both Aurors, and he had nothing to worry about. "I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid," Neville muttered to himself.

"Afraid of what?"

"Ahhh!" Neville yelled as he leapt to hide behind the nearest shadow.

Violet giggled, playing with her braids. "Scardy-Toad Neville."

"I am not," Neville protested, his seven-year-old pride wounded.

"I scared Neville, I scared Neville," Violet chanted, flashing a set of teeth minus one baby tooth. "Did ya find it? The treasure?"

Neville shook his head. "Where's Harry?"

Violet suddenly looked crestfallen. "He left," she said quietly. "He left me all alone so he could save the world."

"Wh –what?" Neville asked. Suddenly, he remembered that he was seventeen, not seven. "What do you mean 'save the world'?"

Violet twirled one of her braids between her little fingers. "He's just like you, but not really, because he's the –"

"Vi, what are you talking about?" Neville demanded impatiently. But he caught something, an emerging shadow behind Violet. His blood ran cold as he recognized the arrogant smirk, the cruel spark behind the hooded eyes, the gauntness of a faded beauty. "Vi . . . get over here."

"What's wrong, Neville?"

"Violet Petunia Potter, over here now!"

She frowned. "Don't call me that."

But she screamed as gnarled fingers grasped her throat, dragging her into the darkness. Bellatrix Lestrange smiled as she dug her nails sadistically into Violet's throat, but kept her gaze on Neville. "Aren't you going to save her, Long-ass? Or are you just going to stand there?"

Neville tried, but his feet were stuck to the ground. "What the bloody –"

Bellatrix's lips curled cruelly. "You didn't do anything to save poor Lily Potter, or be of help in any way, so what makes you think you can do anything for Violet? Or, in fact, actually try. You're a coward, Long-ass, but your parents weren't. Shame you couldn't have picked up on that particular gene."

"Neville! Neville!" Violet shouted as the entire room shook with tremendous force. Neville stood there, giving up on trying, stuck to the floor and knowing he could do nothing to stop this, to stop everything from falling apart. It was his fault.

All his fault.

“Neville! Neville!”

His eyes snapped open with a start and, realizing that a red-haired someone was sitting on top of him, shaking his shoulders, and as a result, nearly fell off the bed in shock.

“Hold on there,” Violet said as she grabbed the back of his shirt before he could tumble to the ground. “I’ve got a Silencing Charm on the curtains, and if you fall out then there’d be no point, will there?”

“What –why –huh?” Neville stuttered.

“Oh, sorry,” Violet said indifferently as she moved off his chest. “But you’ve got a really small bed, probably to prevent any –er– indiscretions. The Founders really didn’t trust boys and their hormones, did they?”

Neville sat up so she could have more room at the end of the bed, but raised his eyebrows when he realized that this was the most she’s spoken to him recently –and civilly.

But when he took a closer look, he realized that there was a shadow behind her eyes, a kind of haunted confusion. Violet was always exceptional at hiding things; that’s why she would make a good Auror someday, he was sure of it. Neville, on the other hand, would not.

“Listen, Neville, Harry’s gone,” Violet said, a flash of pain briefly gracing her expression.

He left. He left me all alone so he could save the world.

“He went to save the world,” Neville said.

Violet narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “Yeah. How’d you know that?”

“But –what does that mean, Vi? Save the world?”

“The Horcruxes,” Violet explained. “He went to destroy them.”

Neville was suddenly much more awake. “WHAT?” he yelled. “That’s suicide! Why would he do that?”

Violet hesitated for a moment. “Because he feels like he has to do something, so no one else dies. He went –he went to do it for Mum.”

Neville shook his head, trying to deny this. This was his responsibility, his fault, Harry shouldn’t have to walk to his death just because –

“It’s my fault!” he shouted angrily, his hands shaking. “I don’t deserve to be a wizard, to own a wand! If I –if I hadn’t been selfish enough to accept Harry’s offer, if –if I’d actually done something during the chaos, then your Mum would still be alive. I as good as killed her. They weren’t after her or you or anyone in your family. They were after me, and it’s my fault she’s dead. But I’m a coward,” Neville said bitterly, remembering the true taunts in his dream. “Instead of going after them myself, I stayed safe in Hogwarts.”

There was something almost sympathetic in the way Violet was looking at him. “I didn’t want you there,” she said softly. “But it’s not your fault. No way you could have known.”

But Neville didn’t want to accept the excuse she was giving him, letting him have. He’d been babied and shielded all his life, but this reality was something he didn’t want to be protected from. “That’s why I didn’t go to the funeral. I was too ashamed and cowardly to show my face after what I’ve done to your family. I didn’t realize that was the reason at the time, I just knew that I couldn’t bring myself to go.”

Violet listened to this with a neutral expression, but moved closer. To Neville’s utter surprise, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly, comfortingly. Just a few weeks ago she’d insulted and berated him but now, when she actually has a substantial reason to hate him, she’s hugging him?

Girls were so confusing.

“What was that for?” Neville asked, not particularly caring if it was rude. He’d appreciated the gesture, even if he tended to shy away from that type of thing, and wanted to know why exactly she had done it.

Violet shrugged, but that shadow in her eyes was back. “Nothing. I just realized how petty it was to stay mad at someone for so long.” She tried to smile, but for once she failed to make it seem genuine.

“Oh, right. So what are you going to do about Harry? Tell McGonagall, I suppose?”

“No. We are going to follow him.”

“What?”

“Well, not just us. I’d say Ron and Hermione too, maybe Luna and Ginny, depending on what they want.”

“Bollocks, Vi, you’re not going anywhere.”

Violet narrowed her eyes. “If you won’t do this because of whatever sense of responsibility you may have, or because I’ll kick your arse if you don’t, then do it because you owe us. If you really think it’s your fault Mum died, then do something about it, for Merlin’s sake!”

“You’d actually trust me not to mess this up?” Neville asked suspiciously. But, he realized, she was sitting on his bed with the curtains charmed silent, looking perfectly comfortable with the situation. If this had been anyone but him, she would be vulnerable to anything.

Violet seemed to follow his train of thought. “I’ve known you my whole life, Nev,” she said. “You’re an arse, but an honorable one.”

Neville sighed. Looks like he had no choice in the matter even if he didn’t want to go. He knew this was long overdue; every day he walked to class, pretending he wasn’t the Boy-Who-Lived, he knew. “Bugger,” he muttered to himself.

Time to grow up.

Harry groaned as he collapsed onto the bed of a run down Muggle motel. Turns out he still had quite a bit of money in his Gringotts account, although it took him a little while to convince them to convert a bit of it to Muggle currency. It was enough for a couple of nights in these kinds of motels, but it should be enough for him to get some information on this orphanage Voldemort was sent to.

Glaring at the ratty ceiling, Harry wondered if just going off on his own was really such a good idea. It was, he decided stubbornly. This way, only my life is in danger, and not anyone else's.

Still, it took Harry a good couple of hours to fall asleep as he dreamed about fictional mazes and treasure hunts, and how despite how hard the puzzles got, they had always succeeded in the end, together.

“Please tell me you’re joking, Minerva.”

“I’m afraid not, James,” McGonagall said solemnly, the crinkles around her eyes deepening. “Neither of them has been in class, and several other students –three Gryffindors and one Ravenclaw– have disappeared as well.”

James felt his blood go cold, not even wanting to consider the possibility that – “Are you sure they left voluntarily, and not – not –”

“I assure you it was their choice,” McGonagall said, handing James two pieces of parchment. “These were left in Violet’s dorm.”

James snatched the parchment rudely, his fingers crinkling the letter as they grasped Violet’s words with desperation. How could they have been so stupid, so selfish? What were they thinking?

He remembered Lily’s still features that day, shuddering as he imagined Violet and Harry’s face the same way, with quiet lines only the dead could imitate. For a moment James couldn’t breathe as Violet’s handwriting bled together in a swirl of ink and blood, the room spinning rapidly as he fell heavily onto the floor, ignoring Minerva’s outcry of concern.

“I’m okay,” he slurred, shaking himself out of it. Just read the bloody letter, he scolded himself. See what’s happened first. Feeling slightly embarrassed, James picked himself off the floor with as much dignity as he could and tried not to rip the parchment in half.

Dad, Uncle Remus, and Uncle Sirius (and Professor McGonagall too, I suppose),

I’m really sorry. Harry decided to take off and hunt for the Horcruxes himself, so me, Neville, Hermione Granger, Ginny and Ron Weasley, and Luna Lovegood went after him, not just to bring him back but to help him too. I know it’s dangerous, and I’d thought Harry was stupid for going in the first place too –at least, at first. But he was doing it for Mum, to make sure it ends now before anyone else dies. I can’t properly explain right now, maybe not ever, but please trust us and

know that we can do a lot more good out here than in Hogwarts, wondering every morning if, when the owls come, we'll get a notice saying one of you had died. If you can, would you get Neville's letter to his Grams? Thanks. Please don't worry about us; I love you all.

Violet

James closed his eyes, and the image of his children lying dead in a ditch somewhere took over any possible hope of rational thought, of the impersonal detachment an Auror needed to keep a cool head in battle.

Hermione Granger? Ron Weasley? He knew Ginny was Harry's girlfriend, but as far as he knew, his son had never so much as spoken to the other two, nevertheless manage to drag them into a suicide mission.

Definitely true Gryffindors, James thought begrudgingly. Brave and reckless.

"How long ago did they leave?" he asked.

"Before breakfast today, I think, but Harry must have left earlier, perhaps the night before."

"All right," James said slowly, pocketing the note. "Can we get an Order team together? I'll alert the Ministry, but I doubt they're going to be of much use, even if it is the Boy-Who-Lived among the missing."

McGonagall pursed her lips, knowing as well as James that the Order was spread thin enough as it was. "Take Sirius and Peter; Remus's position at the werewolf camp is too fragile right now to pull him out."

"Thanks." James paused. "You wouldn't happen to know the location of any of the Horcruxes, would you?"

She shook her head. "I don't, but maybe the Headmaster would," McGonagall replied, gesturing to the painting behind her.

"Albus?" she called briskly. "Albus, wake up."

Dumbledore's portrait gave a start, coughing up the snore lodged in his throat. "You scared me, Minerva. James! What a pleasant —"

McGonagall clicked her tongue impatiently. "Don't try to pretend as if you didn't hear all that, Albus. Was there anything you only shared with Mr. Longbottom and not with any of the Order?"

Dumbledore nodded, pushing his half-moon spectacles higher up on his nose. "I told him everything I knew, but he was hesitant to act upon it. Quite frankly, what surprises me the most is the fact that Mr. Potter knew the same information as Neville despite his promise to keep it to himself. And Neville is not one to break his word."

James and McGonagall exchanged concerned glances as they absorbed this. "How Harry knows doesn't matter right now," James said impatiently. "I just want an idea of where they might go."

"I'm not sure myself, but I believe Voldemort places his Horcruxes in areas of personal importance to him, somewhere that meant something to him at one point or another. I have a few theories, but nothing concrete. If Harry is thinking along those same lines, he'll probably research Tom Riddle and find out where he'd lived or worked if he doesn't know already." Dumbledore stared pointedly at James. "And that is where you should start."

"Right. Tom Riddle." James said, already stepping towards the fireplace. "Firecall me if you find anything else out." And with a flash of green fire, he arrived at Sirius's house, where he was staying temporarily. Their house had been completely demolished on Christmas, but James hadn't had the heart to repair what he knew could never be fully whole again.

A brief glance around informed him that Sirius was still at the Ministry, allowing him a moment of silence to crash onto his best friend's couch, staring at the parchment he'd taken out of his pocket. He had to deliver Neville's letter to his Gran, he knew that, but not right now. He needed to clear his head first. Bring Sirius and Peter, Minerva had said, but as he re-read the letter, James realized that Violet had omitted Peter's name from the heading.

“Why would she write to Sirius and Remus but not to Peter?” James muttered, noting the large amount of space still remaining on the parchment. Violet was never one to waste anything; whenever she wrote a short note, she’d just rip the written section off and store the rest of the parchment for something else.

What if there was something she had only wanted James to see? “Revealio.” Nothing happened. No, it wouldn’t be that easy; any idiot could do a simple reveal charm. James tried using every incantation he knew, but nothing came up. Still, it bothered him –there must be something there, but he just had to think of – wait.

Lily’s beautiful face, flushed from the cold weather, beamed at him from a group photo of their Hogwarts days. Lily had loved those Muggle detective shows, and had passed that onto her children, Violet in particular. James remembered braving a Muggle mall with Lily in order to find a child detective kit to give their daughter for Christmas. Grinning wryly, he remembered all the scourgify charms he’d had to employ to get rid of the residue from Violet’s searches for incriminating fingerprints.

Fingerprints. Secret messages. She and Harry had both gotten into it, especially during their treasure hunts with Neville. Lily would usually leave a blank parchment with clues and lemons on the kitchen counter ready to squeeze.

“Invisible ink,” James realized with a start. Dashing to Sirius’s kitchen, he wasn’t surprised that he couldn’t see anything remotely healthy. After a bit of searching, he managed to find and transfigure an apple into a lemon, and a soap dish into a lemon squeezer. Making a mental note to buy Sirius a new dish, James waited for the words to appear.

He couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride as words slowly began forming on the parchment. Violet had always been resourceful.

It was Uncle Peter, Dad. He’s a spy for Voldemort, and if he’d had the chance, he would have betrayed you, Mum, and Harry all those years ago, when you were in hiding from Voldemort. And if he’d been

successful, I would never have been born, and you both would be dead right now. I can't tell you how I know, but he's the reason Mum's dead, and if you don't arrest him, he could kill someone else. Please believe me, and at the very least give him Veritaserum to find out what he knows, and what he's intending to do. I trust you, Dad, and I hope you'll listen. Love you.

James closed his eyes. Now there was no ignoring it now; not only had Harry warned him, but now Violet. He felt a sudden urge to crumple the parchment in his hands, but couldn't bear to crush his daughter's words. He closed his eyes with a sigh. If his children were proven right, it would only prove what a fool James had been –the fools all three Marauders had been. Peter was his brother, someone he trusted with his life; to imagine timid, twitchy Peter murdering someone in cold blood, knowingly betraying people who cared about him, who would die for him . . . it was just inconceivable.

But James of all people knew the flexibility of the human heart, and how fast people can change. Except this time, his old friend would have changed for the worst. A surge of anger unlike anything he'd ever felt burned in his chest as he remembered the indignity of Lily's death, the sacrifice she made to save all of them –even Peter– and how Wormtail may have played a part in it.

How stupid could James be, not to notice changes –no matter how subtle– in one of his best friends? Unless he'd always been –no. Peter was certainly not a Death Eater during Hogwarts. It must have been after, then, when all of them had eagerly joined the Order, determined to make a difference in the world. James had to smile at the image of four young men, idealistic yet not ignorant of the dangers.

But he can't do this on his own, not if Peter proved to be a Death Eater. If he wasn't restrained, James is sure that he'd strangle the little rat right then and there, no trail, no fuss, just . . . justice.

So, dragging Sirius's well worn cauldron out of the pantry and checking to see if the right ingredients were present, James began brewing Veritaserum, stopping only to allow the potion simmer for the required fifteen minutes and send off a letter to the bait. However, just

as he had sent his own owl off, an unrecognizable one took advantage of the open window to drop a letter into James's hands.

Noting the mechanical printing of his name on the envelope, James thought he knew who this was from. And sure enough, there was a brief, somewhat hurried letter.

Pettigrew is Order spy. Didn't know, couldn't get letter out before.

James crumbled the parchment in his hands and ignited it with his wand, watching the fire overtake the paper as its ashes floated to the ground. Two observations from Violet and Harry were good, but the confirmation from Malfoy –he took a momentary glance at the clock, frowning as he noted Sirius's tardiness.

James had been just about to contact Sirius on their mirror when a swaggering mop of black hair tumbled gracefully out of the fireplace, leaping up in a rather showy manner.

"Practicing your Blonde moves, Padfoot?"

Sirius whirled around immediately, smirking. "Bond, James Bond, you prat."

James tried to match his smile, but his friend noticed the strain, his grin fading worriedly. "Prongs?"

"I need your help, Padfoot, but you're not going to like it."

Peter scowled as James's owl came swooping down upon him, its sharp yellow eyes drilling into him disapprovingly. "Give me that," Peter commanded, reaching for the letter, but Gobedelik only dodged his hand, squawking shrilly at him. "Bloody bird," he muttered. Peter had not been having a good day, and James's stupid owl was not making it any better.

Gobedelik responded to the insult by clawing at his hand with its talons, causing Peter to recoil in pain. "At least my name isn't stupid," he retorted childishly, forgetting that he was having a silent sparring match with an owl. He remembered how horrified James had been

when Sirius had christened the name, the only one Gobedelik had responded to despite James's best efforts.

"What kind of a rubbish name is 'Gobedelik'?" James demanded angrily as the owl refused to answer to the various other names James had tried.

"Is that a word?" Peter wondered airily.

"No."

Sirius smirked. "Well I think it suits him –don't you?"

James didn't even dignify his question with a response.

Finally, Peter gave up on the bird and waited for Gobedelik to come to him. The irritable owl then proceeded to drop the letter on top of Peter's head before it slid into an undesirable spot inside his robes. "I hope whatever it is, it's important," Peter muttered as he reached for the letter.

As luck would have it, the front door decided to bang open just as Peter's hand was placed in what must have looked like the most awkward, disturbing position possible. Draco Malfoy gaped a bit as his eyes adjusted to the blinding sunlight, abruptly turning his face as he regained his senses.

"Er –uh –"

Peter stared, forgetting to remove his hand from beneath his robes. This was the most inarticulate he's ever heard a Malfoy be, and quite frankly, it startled him more than what he looked like he was doing –oh. Hastily, Peter made a desperate grab for the letter, only to fail and reluctantly remove his hand, foolishly further incriminating himself.

"What is it Malfoy?" he snapped.

"Just wondering what you were doing –going," Malfoy said rather weakly, still refusing to look Peter in the eye.

“Going home, what does it look like?”

Malfoy muttered something darkly under his breath.

“What was that?” Peter said nastily. “I didn’t quite catch that.” Merlin, it felt good to terrorize the young Malfoy heir, to be superior to a boy whose father constantly looked down at Peter.

Well, he didn’t seem so much terrified as disturbed, but Peter was willing to excuse that tiny detail.

The mini Malfoy raised a carefully arched eyebrow that Peter could have sworn was hereditary. “I said, it looks like you’re amusing yourself the –” He paused to scan Peter up and down with a bratty smirk. “Best way you can.”

“A bloody owl dropped a sodding letter into my sodding robes!” Peter yelled, blushing in humiliation from a remark from a seventeen-year-old.

Malfoy scoffed. “Right. Accio letter!”

Peter yelped in surprise as the letter flew out from underneath his robes and into the blonde’s hands. “Let’s see – ‘Peter, meet me at Sirius’s apartment as soon as you can. It’s about that important tea party we were planning. James.’ Aww, how cute,” Malfoy sneered, levitating the letter back to Peter. “Does the Dark Lord know about your escapades with tea cozies and knitting, or shall I inform him?”

“Of course he knows, you –” Peter managed to stop himself in mid-sentence before the brat could go running off whining to Snivellus. Malfoy was only a kid, why should Peter treat him like he was an actual threat? Except he was the one to perform the spell that killed Lily, Peter reminded himself. He’s far from innocent.

Malfoy shrugged. “Go get those tea bags then. Sure that’ll really prove your worth and all.”

Scowling, Peter turned his back on Malfoy and one of Voldemort's bases of operation, Apparating to Sirius's apartment with as much dignity as he could muster. If he'd looked back at the boy still standing on the steps, he would have noticed an almost triumphant smile resting contentedly on Malfoy's lips as he acknowledged what may be the last time he'll ever see Wormtail.

With a clumsy pop, Peter called for Sirius and James, lazily discarding his robes onto Sirius's sofa with habitual ease. Frowning at the lack of response, he ventured into the kitchen. He would think, if this was a meeting about Order business, his two best friends would be ready to receive him, and get the often mood dampening news out of the way.

Peter didn't even feel the Petrifying Charm coming towards him as he crossed into the kitchen. With a loud thump, his immobile body fell hard onto the ground, his eyes large and bulging as he looked wildly at the two men coming slowly into focus, both with their wands in hand and that grave expression that always accompanied their faces before a particularly nasty Auror or Order mission.

No, he thought, his stomach sinking as a cold realization washed over him. No, they couldn't have –how– oh Merlin, forgive me, my friends.

His eyes desperate, Peter tried hard to explain, to tell them that his actions were all for the greater good, for their good, their safety. But he was powerless to do anything as they stiffly hauled him into a chair, conjured strong shackles and chains that wrapped around him eerily like snakes ready for the hunt. Their eyes –they were both so cold, so businesslike as they secured the chains, manually making sure they were extra tight.

Peter watched as Sirius mechanically forced his mouth open, as James dumped a suspicious substance into his mouth, gagging as it flowed unbidden down his throat. The cloudy, misty feeling in his mind informed him of the identity of the truth potion now coursing through his veins.

Nonverbally, James summoned Peter's wand as Sirius removed the Petrifying Charm on Peter's body, allowing him full movement of his limbs.

"Padfoot, Prongs . . ." Peter began, smiling uncertainly at the pair. "Uh –are we practicing a drill or something? What happened to the important Order business?"

James focused his quietly blazing eyes on Peter, and it was then that he realized that whatever he tried was completely futile. He could try to mince his words and talk himself out of this all he wanted, but they were always far more clever than Peter, and they would find out the truth eventually.

"Please –" Peter begged, but James's cold voice broke him off.

"Are you a Death Eater?"

Peter fought as best he could, but the ripping pain in his veins and head caused him to release a gasping "Yes."

Sirius exchanged dark, silent glances with James, making the pair all the more frightening to the Death Eater squirming slightly in his seat. "James, please, I can expl –"

"Are there any other spies in the Order?"

"No, but –"

"Did you know about the Death Eater attack at Christmas?" James continued, his voice surprisingly steady.

Peter spastically clenched and unclenched his fists, knowing there was no possible way to get out of this question. "Yes, but –"

"And," James said, a slight tremble in his voice, "did you or did you not kill Lily Potter?"

"No," Peter said firmly as a surprised expression crossed James's face. "No, it wasn't me, it was Draco Malfoy! Those damn Malfoys,

right?" he offered, laughing weakly as he tried to fake a smile. "Always hated Harry, didn't he? Both got into epic fights –only appropriate –no, not appropriate, but I suppose it makes – makes sense that –oh Merlin . . . I didn't kill her, James. I wouldn't, I couldn't, I loved Lily –"

"No! No." James snapped, anger and betrayal radiating underneath the controlled tone. "You gave us up, you may not have cast the spell, but you as good as killed her by inviting the Death Eaters into our home, by bringing them there!" James took a deep, calming breath as he closed his eyes to collect himself. "Veritaserum or no, you didn't care for Lily in the slightest, or any of our lives, for that matter. It could have easily been me or Sirius or Remus lying dead on my living room floor, or Violet or Harry . . ."

"But you lot weren't going for any of us, were you?" Sirius asked, unusually quiet. "It was Neville. He was invited, and you informed them the best time to attack us at our most vulnerable. How very . . . Slytherin of you, Peter. Suppose you and Snivellus are having a right party in the snake pit, eh? "

"No," Peter said quickly, feeling like a broken record. "It's not like that at all –I hate Snape, he murdered Dumbledore for Merlin's sake!"

"And that's any better than what you did?" James asked, shaking his head incredulously. "At least we knew he was a little slimeball, but you? You, we trusted. You, we considered a brother. You were a betrayal of the deepest kind, and for that, I can never forgive you."

Desperately, Peter turned to Sirius with hopeful eyes, even when he knew Sirius was the most unforgiving, condemning of the four Marauders, the one who hated the Dark Arts and what it represented the most. If only Remus were here; surely he'd be reasonable, right?

"You're a right little rat, Peter," Sirius growled, Padfoot's ferocity entering into his eyes. "And I would gladly feed you to Moony if he wouldn't feel so bloody guilty about it. If you're thinking Remus will save you –which I'm sure you are– I can tell you right now that he won't. As tolerant as Remus may be, Lily's death is not something he'll forgive anyone for."

"When?" James asked quietly, a distinct pain layered behind the hatred.

"A few months after we joined the Order, the first time," Peter answered willingly despite the vague question.

James sat down heavily on a kitchen chair opposite from Peter, giving up the act of the cold interrogator he was so used to playing. But this admission did not placate Sirius in the least; instead, the combination of that and looking at James's slumped, defeated form only seemed to further feed the fire.

Face contorted in anger, Sirius gripped Peter's arms with violent strength, causing the smaller man to squeal loudly in pain. Sirius smirked almost sadistically as he increased his grip, thoroughly tempted to give the rat a good kick in the groin. That always served to both humiliate and harm at the same time, a win-win. He moved his face closer to Peter, making sure all his former friend could see was their years of trust and friendship ebbing away before his very eyes.

"You've made stupid mistakes before, Peter, but this by far has been your worst," Sirius growled. "Lily would have died for you; you understand that, don't you? She would have died for you, and she did, unknowingly, to save your worthless skin from the bloody Death Eaters! We would have thrown ourselves at those lovely green lights for you, all of us, yet you can't seem to muster enough courage to say 'no' or not even forget to mention the fact that Neville was coming to James and Lily's house for Christmas? All you had to do was keep your bloody mouth shut and Lily would be here right now, alive. You're a sodding coward, Wormtail, a bloody horrible excuse for a Gryffindor and a selfish prat who –"

"I did it to help you!" Peter shouted, wincing at the increased pain. "You and James and Remus and Lily and –and the kids! Merlin, you know I would never want to hurt them." He paused, waiting to see if Sirius would interrupt him. To his surprise, Sirius seemed to be taking this in hungrily. He needs motive, Peter realized with sudden clarity. He needs to know why. Well, he'd tell him, and maybe make them understand in the process. "We were losing, Sirius, everyone knew it.

I –I didn't do it for myself. I joined way before the Prophecy was made, before –before I knew I had to hurt them."

James looked up at this, his eyes suspiciously red but lacking in any trace of tears or an expression of the gravity of the devastation he must have felt as Peter admitted his ties to the Death Eaters.

"We were losing, and I wanted to make sure all of us would survive whatever happened next, no matter which side won. Don't you see? We would be protected either way by playing both sides! I just didn't know what it lead to; I'd always intended to be a quiet member, passing as little information as I could, but I never –I never thought I would be brought into the spotlight to pass information about my best friends." Peter hung his head in shame. "The second time –I felt my Mark burn, and I had no choice to answer. And again, we were in a strange place, what with Neville Longbottom being completely useless in trying to defeat the Dark Lord and everything."

"So you decided to betray everything we've believed in because you were afraid we'd lose?" James said dangerously, getting up. "Every single one of us would prefer a noble death with our heads held high, fighting for the freedom our kids will enjoy rather than give in and join the dictator we tried so hard to defeat."

"But don't you see, James, if you'd died a noble death there'd be no one to take care of Harry and Violet! Who, James? Who would take them in if you, Lily, Sirius, Remus –all of us– had died fruitlessly fighting the good fight? Better to be alive and raising your own kids yourself than dead tossing and turning in your grave unable to do anything! Maybe, if you'd died, Violet wouldn't even exist."

"Yeah, she mentioned that," James muttered. "But that doesn't change what you did."

"All of you were always so clever –so much smarter than poor, bumbling Peter," he said bitterly, lost in age old resentments. "Nobody could understand why you lot were friends with me –I've heard the rumors, how I dragged you down, followed after you like a fan girl or something."

“Since what does that matter?” Sirius snapped. “We’ve never thought of you that way, and you know it.”

But Peter continued on as if he hadn’t heard him. “And then I could never do anything useful for the Order, other than the odd spars we had with Death Eaters. A lowly desk job for an insignificant wizard doesn’t exactly contribute much to the cause.” He laughed bitterly. “I just wanted to do something useful. To matter. I remembered your friendship, how lonely I could have been without you guys, and sacrificing my dignity to become a Death Eater was how I chose to repay you.”

Both Aurors were silent after this quiet confession. Neither James nor Sirius looked at each other, both slowly forming their own opinions before consulting each other for the judgment, how the intent weighed with the cost.

Finally, a quick, condemning nod was exchanged as they turned on Peter. “As heroic as your motives are, it still doesn’t change what you’ve done,” Sirius spat.

Peter couldn’t stop the terrified squeak that came from the bottom of his throat. “I am truly sorry,” he said slowly, trembling slightly. “And I hope you’ll come to understand.” Without warning, his form shrank as his features contorted into that of a rat, abandoning his wand and scurrying as quickly as he could to his robes on the sofa, squiggling into them with Sirius and James hot on his trail. With a squeak of relief, Wormtail activated the emergency Portkey and was gone.

The remaining Marauders glanced at the empty spot where the robes and their friend had just been. They remained silent for a moment, not quite believing this was happening.

“Do you think he noticed the tracer you put in him?” James asked quietly.

Sirius shook his head, sighing heavily as he rubbed his eyes. “No, he was too scared. I think I put enough pressure on his arm to equal the pain, anyway. It’s okay, James, there’s no way he can manage to get that out of him.”

Now thoroughly exhausted, James collapsed onto the couch, his head in his hands. "All along," he muttered in despair. "Peter was the traitor all along, and I didn't –how could I have missed that, Sirius? How could I have missed all the times he skipped out early, or made those pathetic little excuses?"

Sirius didn't answer for a moment, instead taking the seat next to his best friend. "I didn't either, Prongs, don't be too hard on yourself. None of us noticed." He smiled bitterly, thinking back to those dark days, when both he and James had been reluctantly suspicious of Remus. "We'd thought he'd finally gotten himself a girl, remember? Of course, I'm sure old Voldie would make an –er– adequate substitute."

James raised his eyebrows incredulously as the twitch on the corner of his mouth took over his face, laughter exploding out of his chest. Soon, Sirius joined in on the ridiculous laughter that could only rise out of despair, out of a desperate time when laughter was experiencing a devastating shortage.

"C –can you imagine w –what a first date would be like?" James asked, wheezing a bit as his stomach, chest, and heart absorbed the lack of air.

"Pretty bloody romantic, I think," Sirius chuckled. "Wonder if –no, I can't imagine that. I think Peter would be the one to wear the little pink bow in his hair."

James snorted. "Naw, I think that's more Umbridge's foray. Maybe one of those tiny sparkly purses that Violet had wanted." His smile disappeared. "The kind we'd gotten for her. She never did get to open that present."

They fell into silence again. "We should probably inform the Order," Sirius said.

"Not all of them, just in case," James agreed. "McGonagall, Remus, Kingsley, Moody, Tonks . . . the senior ones."

Still, neither of them moved an inch from Sirius's couch. "We're a pair of lazy arses, aren't we?" Sirius asked airily.

"Yup."

"That was rhetorical."

"Nothing's rhetorical with you, Padfoot."

"Right."

"Come on, let's go," James said finally, preparing to Apparate to Headquarters. Sirius nodded, and together their simultaneous pops echoed throughout the room, leaving a painful memory of the departure of who was once a beloved friend.

Wormtail scurried underneath the city streets, trying not to be revolted by the stink of the sewers. He whimpered as he nursed his paw, now bleeding from the scuffle that had ensued between him and another particularly aggressive rat. Cursing his decision to travel this way, Wormtail braced himself for the agony that would surely result from this particular jump, given his poor, missing finger.

He couldn't believe how careless he'd been, to lose a finger to a rat! He, the intelligent human being, had lost to a stupid, insignificant rodent who had just happened to be bigger than him.

The orphanage, just get to the orphanage, he thought resolutely. There was no way he could make his way back to Headquarters, definitely not without a wand and with both the Order and the Ministry going after him. So, he'd go to the next best thing –the location of what he suspected to be where one of Voldemort's souls were. How he found out about the souls had been pure coincidence; a slip of the tongue and some digging, it'd been ridiculously easy to pry Voldemort's greatest secret from his highest Death Eaters.

He'd have lost favor with Voldemort now, what with losing his valuable position as a spy in the Order. Wormtail would have to find another way to repay him, to show his worth and keep everyone safe. He wasn't quite sure what he would do with this, whether he would

guard it or use it as blackmail, but he just knew he had to do something.

In relief, he spotted what he hoped was the right building. Wormtail scurried across the grass, hoping against hope that he wouldn't meet any roadblocks –

“Mousey!”

Wormtail squeaked shrilly as he was picked up by a pair of soft, human hands. For a terrified moment he thought it was Sirius or James, but found himself looking into the wide, innocent eyes of a little girl.

“My mousey,” she cooed, giggling at Wormtail's futile attempts to escape. He considered biting her, but looking at her again, couldn't bear to. She looked too much like Violet when she was at that age.

“What you got there?” A boy asked, coming over. Once he caught sight of Wormtail, a disapproving frown flickered across his face. “You know Sister Ann is gonna get mad, don't you?”

The little girl turned to the boy with doleful eyes. “Please, Peter, I really, really want him. He looks like our old one.”

“But that was before –before we had to come here.” Peter rolled his eyes as the girl pouted again. “Fine, fine, but just don't let the nuns see.”

The girl gave a victory cry before stroking Wormtail's slightly patched fur enthusiastically. Ooh, that feels good, he thought before shaking himself out of it. I'm a man, not a rat, a man, not a rat . . .

“He needs a name, Delia,” Peter said absently, furrowing his eyebrows. “Wait, he's hurt. Look at his foot –it's like a scab. Scabbers, maybe?”

Delia made a face and shook her head as her eyes lit up with realization. Grinning, she pinched Wormtail's flabby behind before holding the rat up to her eye level, her expression playful.

“Welcome home, Mr. Fluffypants!”

Harry sat on his ratty bed, hunched over the notes and papers strewn all around him. It had been hard trying to locate the orphanage Tom Riddle had lived in. Most of the records were hard to come by, especially since Harry didn't possess a library card, but he'd managed to sneak past security using magic. Thank Merlin I'm seventeen now, he thought. Makes things so much easier.

He knew perfectly well that the orphanage was an obvious choice of a hiding place; he could only hope that Voldemort's pride and arrogance would surpass his Slytherin cunning. Harry frowned, sifting through blueprints he had taken great pains to acquire, searching for any possible place where Voldemort could easily ward and hide something as valuable as a piece of his soul.

The Muggle pen in his hand thumped against the crinkled paper loudly as he searched every square inch of the orphanage. Merlin, he thought. It could be anywhere. The Horcrux could be in a bloody broom closet, for all I know. Allowing himself a groan of frustration, Harry decided that the only way of really finding out was infiltrating the orphanage itself. He winced as he remembered the unpleasant shock he'd received as he'd tried to magically force his way in. Even the usually reliable Muggle lock picking trick hadn't helped any.

No, the best way would be to get himself invited in willingly –but how? He didn't look old enough to adopt a kid, and he wasn't sure they would take him in as a needy orphan. Harry bit his lip uncertainly, but realized that it was his only choice. It would take longer than he'd hoped but –

Bang. Harry tensed at the insistent fist pounding on his door, sensing a magical presence on the other side. Grabbing his wand and keeping it directly pointed at the door, Harry called out calmly. “Who is it?”

“Harry, it's Violet –let us in already,” a familiar, impatient voice sighed.

Narrowing his eyes suspiciously, Harry moved to the side of the door. "Right," he scoffed. "As if she'd be stupid enough to –" Harry froze. She couldn't have, could she?

"Open the bloody door already, Harry, I need to use the loo!"

Harry cautiously unlocked the door magically, casting a shield charm around himself as a group of people barged into his motel room, searching for him. With a few well placed charms, everyone had been either bound or paralyzed temporarily; at least, until he asserted if they were really who they said.

However, a moment later Harry found that he had missed one person. Lily Potter's supposed ghost glided unconcerned into the room, smiling at Harry with an ironic pride despite the situation.

"You didn't really think we'd let you do this alone, did you?" she asked softly.

"I didn't really think you lot would be stupid enough to follow me," Harry replied tersely. "I thought you were Death Eaters –or McGonagall."

Lily smiled slightly but gestured at the petrified forms of Harry's schoolmates. "It'd probably be a good idea to release them now."

"Finite." Violet was the first to recover from her stiff limbs and quickly cross the distance between her and her brother."

"Thanks a lot, Harry," she sneered. "We come all this way to save your arse and you stun us? Nice."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Save me?"

Violet nodded. "You can't expect to find and destroy these things all by yourself, do you? I mean, even if you are the Bo –bothersome magical genius you are," she corrected hastily.

Harry grimaced at Violet's near slip. "If you honestly think I'm letting you do this –"

“We’re here to stay, so you’ll just have to Banish us, won’t you?”

“Don’t think I won’t.”

Violet smirked smugly. “But can you Banish your own mother?”

“She’s not my Mum,” Harry said coldly, ignoring Lily’s flinch.

But Violet’s smirk only grew larger, clearly enjoying this. “She’s a gho –er– sorry, spirit –she’s Banish-proof. Honestly, Harry, you should know that by now.”

Harry sighed. “Vi, if you come all this way to joke around, then you’re really not taking this seriously enough. You could be killed –”

“Yeah, I know,” Violet said sharply. “But I already am anyway, right?”

Harry glanced nervously at his still recovering friends, who were shooting him disgruntled looks as they stretched their sore limbs. “Listen,” he hissed, lowering his voice. “You’re alive here, aren’t you? And if this is some sort of alternative universe or something that’s been thriving long before I came here, you can live after all this is over.”

Violet’s expression softened, smiling sadly. “Being alive here isn’t worth it if you’re dead. And you will fail without help. Even Indiana Jones had backup. Muggle movie we loved when we –er– were little,” she explained.

“Face it, mate, we’re here now and you can’t do anything about,” Ron said cheerfully, thumping him on the back. “I’m definitely not going back to face McGonagall’s wrath.”

Harry turned his head to stare at him incredulously, about to lecture the room about the dangers and gravity of the situation Ron and Hermione’s counterparts should have faced with him. These two and Luna, Ginny, Neville, Violet, were not ready; they’ve never faced tarantulas or Dementors or the Department of Mysteries –

But Bill had died here, hadn't he? Hermione and Luna had faced different kinds of loneliness, and although Ginny had never been to the Chamber of Secrets, she had her own strength from growing up the only girl in a family of boys. And Violet? Violet was the annoying little sister and had her weaknesses, but she was strong and observant, the first to recognize Harry for who he was –the brother she'd lost, then gained.

"We're not leaving," Ginny said softly. "This is our choice, to help you and Neville find You-Know-Who's Horcruxes and destroy them."

"I thought we were hunting Heliopaths," Luna whispered loudly.

Harry laughed. Luna had definitely not changed. "You're sure, then?" he asked the room seriously. "You can't back out once you've started."

To his surprise, Neville stepped forward to face him, and held his hand out. "This isn't your job," he said. "It's mine, and I'm not quite sure why you're doing this, but the point is you are, and I'm not going to run away again."

"What about Scri –"

Neville scowled. "Screw the Minister. And the Ministry, come to think of it. Prats, the lot of them. Well, maybe not everyone; Ginny and Ron's dad's in the Order, and so's Shacklebolt, Tonks, and Moody –"

"Neville," Harry interrupted. "Are you done?"

"Er –yeah." Neville blushed. "I just –well, chasing off after mad objects that could be anything and anywhere isn't exactly daily routine."

Harry smirked. "Luckily for you, I think I know where the next one is."

They all gathered around as Harry laid out the orphanage blueprints, letting Neville explain the building's significance in Tom Riddle's life. He almost wanted to laugh at the crinkled foreheads, the arguing and the discussion and Merlin, everything they used to do. Still do, he

reminded himself. They were still kids. They were kids way over their heads, but they came anyway with an understanding of what was going on in the world, what had already happened to their families.

Of what could happen to them.

“Ron, you prat, we can’t just burst in like that!” Ginny was saying angrily. “Tactless!”

The redhead shrugged. “We could modify their memories –”

Violet shook her head. “No, there’s way too many orphans in there, not to mention the adults and –”

“We could still –”

“It’d be magical suicide –”

“Whatis that?”

“It’s when –”

“Don’t be daft, we’d be single handedly exposing the Wizarding –”

“Not single.”

“Well, you are, at any rate, Neville.”

“Unnecessary, Vi.”

“What about Alohamora? Surely the Muggles wouldn’t –”

“If he’s smart, Voldemort probably already installed Heliopaths to guard the doors.”

“No good there,” Harry broke in. “I’ve tried, but every time the door sent me flying ten feet into the air. The Muggle way didn’t work either.”

“Ten feet?”

“Yeah. Bloody well hurt, too. But the point is, we can’t force ourselves in, we’ve got to be invited –”

“Sorta like vampires, yeah?”

“Er –I suppose. Problem is, most of us are nearly eighteen –when Muggles are of age– so we can’t really pass for helpless orphans.”

“What about some sort of de-aging potion?”

Ginny frowned. “I remember Slughorn talking about this before . . . but the potion took months to complete, and we don’t have –”

“It’s hopeless then,” Neville said, sighing.

“No, it’s not,” Violet snapped. “Weren’t you the one that was all heroic and ‘we’re here to help and we’re not going to leave’ a few minutes ago?”

“Why are you yelling at me?”

“I’m not yelling at you!” she bellowed.

“Violet, calm down.”

“He’s –”

“And you’re acting like a baby. Stop it, or I’ll hand you over to Dad.”

Her eyes widened. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would. I never wanted you here in the first –”

“Can’t do anything about it now though, can you?”

Harry rubbed his temples irritably. “Yeah, well, at least it was quiet when you lot weren’t here.”

“We could disguise ourselves.”

The room hushed at the timid voice, every head turning to look at Hermione, who shrank back from all the attention.

“What was that?” Harry asked.

Her cheeks flushed. “Er –I was just thinking, maybe –maybe we could go in disguised,” she finished, her voice stronger. “You know, pretend like we’re reporters, something so we can ask questions without being suspicious.”

“Ginny’s not doing it,” Ron said immediately.

His sister glared at him. “Let her finish, dolt.”

“And two or three others could go with whoever it is as a cameraman or something, and the rest can keep watch outside.”

Harry nodded in approval. “We can also fit a couple of people in under Disillusionment Charms.”

“I’ll do it.”

Everyone turned to Violet. “No,” Harry said firmly.

“Why not?”

“Same reasons as why Ginny isn’t going.”

“What, so Hermione and Luna aren’t important?” Violet demanded.

“No, that’s not –”

“That’s what it sounded like,” Ginny said coldly.

Harry sighed. “I’m sorry. It’s just that it’s risky, and you lot aren’t even supposed to be here anyway.”

“But you need us,” Luna added wisely. “More than you’d ever thought.”

Harry gave her a strange look, remembering the many bizarre yet accurate things the Luna he knew always said. "Alright, fine," he said, "but we've got to choose right about who's going and who's watching outside."

"I already said I'd do it," Violet grumbled. "And I think you and Neville should definitely go in too."

"Really?" Neville said sarcastically. "I'm surprised you don't think I'll trip over something and blow our cover –"

Violet dismissed this with a wave of her hand. "But you're both good at sensing hidden magic and wards."

"No I'm not," Neville protested. "You always said –"

"Yeah, well, you are," Violet interrupted impatiently. She glared when Ron scoffed at this. "Don't you remember the scavenger hunts? We got older, figured out all of their tricks, so Mum decided to charm wards and glamours around the clues –you and Harry were better at breaking them, though."

Neville frowned. "I don't remember that. They were clues, not –"

"No, they were charms. And I'm betting the Horcrux is hidden behind really strong wards –which only make sensing them easier, if you do it right."

"The locket –the fake Horcrux Du –Dumbledore found– wasn't exactly easy to find," Neville said nastily. "It took even Dumbledore a little poking around and blood magic to find it, and he's a hell of a lot stronger than any of us."

"Yeah, but he said it was simple, crude magic," Harry muttered.

"What?" Neville asked, confused. "How would you know that?"

"I told him," Violet said hastily.

Neville narrowed his eyes. "Thanks for the discretion, Violet."

"Stop fighting," Harry snapped. "The point is, we have to try, even if it takes us days to find it. Alright, so Violet will go in under a Disillusionment Charm, maybe someone else too, and Neville and I will go with whoever's disguised. Who's good at acting?"

"It was Hermione's idea," Ron said. "Maybe she'd –"

"I'm not very good at lying," she admitted quietly. "Or sneaking around."

"Then it's either Ron, Luna, or Ginny."

"I dunno, Harry, I think only Violet should go in under the Disillusionment; it'd be too hard to manage and coordinate with two people. And the three reporters should be enough to cover most of the place; she just has to look for the off limits or sketchy places the reporters can't get to," Ginny said. "And I volunteer."

"Ginny, no," Ron said.

"If you don't want me to help in any way, then why'd you bring me?" Ginny demanded.

"I didn't, Violet did!" Ron protested. "And there was no leaving you behind once you knew about it."

"Would you like to go then, Ron?" Harry asked, eyebrows raised. His Ron would have gone immediately out of loyalty to Harry, and to keep Ginny safe, but this one wasn't as tied to Harry as his counterpart.

"If it'd prevent Ginny from going, yeah."

"C'mon, Ron, we all know you're a horrible actor," Ginny argued. "But you're a good lookout; honestly, I think we'd all feel better with you watching outside."

Ron glared, not quite drawn in by the flattery, but he sighed. "If she gets so much as a paper cut, I'll skin you," he said to Harry.

Harry nodded. "Don't worry."

"Okay then," Ron said, rubbing his hands together. "Let's do this."

“Can’t sleep?”

Harry whirled around rapidly, startled to see Lily standing behind him, smiling slightly as a cool breeze blew through the rickety balcony. He’d almost forgotten she’d been there.

“You didn’t talk at all,” he noted absently, turning back to face the near empty parking lot. He heard her feet creaking on the floor as she stood next to him. Aren’t ghosts supposed to float?

“No, I didn’t.”

“Why?” Harry demanded. “If you’re here to help like you say you are, then why didn’t you?”

“I thought you had control over the situation. You didn’t need me anymore.”

“Funny, I don’t think I ever did.” He quickly glanced at her, gauging her reaction.

“Perhaps, but I remember a time when you couldn’t even roll over by yourself,” Lily shot back. “Your dad would poke you a bit as you tried. I told him not to help, but —” She sighed. “James always was incorrigible.”

“Did Sirius help too?” Harry asked, drawn into the conversation despite himself.

Lily laughed. “Of course! He wanted another walking and talking Marauder to spoil and teach tricks. Sirius had tried very hard to hide his excitement, as usual, but he can be so transparent sometimes. It’s too bad Azkaban drained him of most of that energy —it’s what made him Sirius.”

Harry’s blood froze. “Have —have you seen him? If you’re telling the truth, that is,” he added hastily.

His mother faced him with sad eyes. "You're still suspicious? I suppose it's rightly earned, with everything you've had to go through. I wish –never mind. Can't change the past, right?"

"But you can change the future?" Harry asked slyly. "Is that why you're here?"

"In a sense."

"Look, nothing in this place has been what it seems, and I still don't know what I'm doing here. And you clearly know something I don't."

"It's not important."

"The hell it's not!"

"I suppose it is, but you're –just be patient, there's a reason –"

"What, for everything? Was there a reason why you –Mum– she died here, once I was starting to get to know her?" Harry demanded. "Why am I here if I'm just going to lose a family I just gained? Is this some sort of sick cosmic joke?"

Lily sighed bitterly. "I think we're all stuck in one big joke, Harry. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't make the most out of this. Think about it; it's almost as good as –as seeing the future. Has it really been a negative experience? Haven't you gained something good from all this?"

Yes, he had, but her earnest tone made his eyes narrow and senses tune in to anything he may need to defend himself for.

"Was it you?" he asked, drawing his wand. "Did you send me here?"

"And how would I have done that?" Lily asked tiredly. She suddenly looked ragged, running a hand through her hair in a way reminiscent of her husband. "I'm dead, Harry. I can only do so much to affect the living."

"But you know who did, don't you?"

Lily hesitated. “No, I don’t. I wasn’t trying to imply –I’m just optimistic, I guess.”

Harry scoffed. “Right.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, “for dying and leaving you with Petunia. She hasn’t treated you well, has she?”

“No.”

“I hurt her, by accepting the Hogwarts letter,” Lily said, almost to herself. “I abandoned her for another world, for people she refused to understand, and then died for them –or at least, that’s what she thinks. But I can’t imagine life –or death– without magic, without James or you.”

Harry remained silent, hating himself for gripping to these meaningless words so tightly, but unable to bear walking away. He knew she wasn’t lying, he could feel it, but the knot in his chest was unbearable. His parents had always meant a lot to him, and he’d loved their memory unconditionally, but Merlin, their deaths had never made him hurt like this before. Getting to know them here, loving them, only created pain for yet another loved one dead.

“You never answered my question,” Harry pointed out, determined to avoid this conversation. “Why didn’t you say anything during the planning?”

Lily sighed, one eyebrow knowingly quirked. “Only family can see me.”

“Ron and Hermione are family!”

She shook her head. “Not to me, they’re not. Blood relatives can see me, but so can Sirius, Remus, and Peter, for obvious reasons.”

“You consider Wormtailfamily?” Harry demanded angrily, tightening his grip on the rail.

“He’s my brother-in-law,” Lily said sadly. “Always has been, and always will be. Just because I hate him for his betrayal doesn’t make him any less family.”

Harry shook his head.

“He was a good bloke, once. I can’t begrudge the Peter who’d ‘fallen’ into the lake so James could save him and show off his heroism. He was sopping wet! Got a bad fever after that episode, I believe. Merlin, I let James have it for that.”

Harry snorted. “Dad was a right idiot, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Lily said dreamily. “He was.”

Harry glanced out into the night, the misty vapors shielding the half moon from them. He couldn’t help but shiver, feeling a strange apprehension creeping up on him. I’m right, I’ve got to be, or how does Dumbledore expect me to find all of these Horcruxes? If anything happened to his friends –it won’t, he reassured himself. It can’t.

Feeling unnerved, he turned to see Lily watching him curiously, longing in her eyes. Their eyes. Maybe, just maybe, fate had smiled on him and given him a guardian angel to help him out for once. Maybe Lily was right, and that there was just as much to be gained from this experience as there was to be lost.

Maybe he could save lives by putting them at risk.

It sounded ridiculous and selfish, even in his mind, but Harry was determined that it would never come to that, never come to him making the decision that would save others but condemn one.

“You should go to bed,” Lily commented softly. “You’ll need your energy tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I probably should. You?”

Lily’s eyes dulled sadly. “Ghosts don’t sleep.”

Harry nodded wearily and walked back inside, away from the ominous moonlight and sharp breeze, from the ghost with sad green eyes. But they never escaped him even as he drifted up into uneasy sleep, dreaming of determination, sacrifice, and the blinding light that had brought his world crashing around him before it had even begun. “Hello, Jenny Watson from The Daily Telegraph, Local News. I’m so sorry for the short notice, but we’d like to interview you and some of your residents about the foster care system and the success rate of your adoptions.”

The woman blinked, slightly stunned, but quickly regained her posture. “I’m sorry?”

Ginny grinned charismatically, reaching into her makeshift purse to take out her ID. She held in a wince as the sharp paper edges inside cut her finger, bemoaning the day when she’d daydreamed her way through the one Transfiguration class that would have helped her successfully transform the motel’s Bible into a purse.

“The Daily Telegraph,” she repeated, handing the ID to the woman.

She scanned the ID briefly before returning it to Ginny, eyes narrowed. “You’re only twenty-one.”

Ginny waved the issue aside. “I’m on an internship, and this article’s my first go at actually reporting. See, I’ve already made one mistake –not letting you know ahead of time on the fellytone –”

“You mean the telephone?”

“Er –yeah. Sorry, I get twisted tongue a lot,” Ginny said hastily, blushing.

The woman was now looking at Ginny strangely, and Harry caught the slight movement of her foot slowly closing the door.

“Wait!” he said. “Sorry, G –Jenny here gets really nervous. Novices, you know. Can’t get through an introduction without stuttering. Sorry, are you Sister Cole?”

“No, I’m a volunteer, Lydia. Who’re you?”

“Harry, photographer,” he explained. “And this is Hermione, her –er– junior supervisor.”

Hermione looked terribly embarrassed, smiling uncertainly as she pushed her mismatched glasses further up her nose. Looking slightly more confident, she straightened herself and smoothed out the ruffles in her skirt, addressing the volunteer.

“Is Sister Cole free? We’d love to speak with the matron.”

Lydia hesitated before opening the door wider. “I’ll ask her,” she said, leading them into a room furnished with antique chairs and polished wooden tables. Harry felt a rush of air pass him as Violet and Neville slipped away under the Invisibility Cloak.

Harry looked around curiously, wondering how the scraggly building could afford such luxury. “Aren’t you afraid the kids will –I dunno– ruin the carpet or something?”

But she dismissed this question with a wave of her hand as she walked out the door. “They know they’re not allowed in the greeting room,” she said shortly before the door clicked shut behind her.

Immediately, the group leapt off the cushions and began inspecting the room, only to find nothing but neutral warmth.

“D’you think the Horcrux is in here, if the kids aren’t allowed?” Ginny asked, gently lifting an ornate figurine.

Harry frowned, closing his eyes as he tried to sense any magical tension in the room. “No,” he said finally. “I think Voldemort would have put it in a more secure place, not one where people are in and out constantly. Not like it’s up the chimney or –Ginny? What’re you doing?”

Ginny pulled her head out of the chimney sheepishly, a sprinkle of ash freckling her nose. “Just checking,” she said.

Click.

“Ms. Watson, this is Sister Cole.”

An extremely elderly woman limped into the room, heavily veined hands gripping her cane tightly. Lydia quickly returned to her side, helping the matron sit down across from the teenagers, eyeing them curiously with aged eyes.

“Forgive me,” she said. “We haven’t had many reporters pass by, not since that terrible fire almost –what was it– thirty years ago.”

Ginny, who had taken her seat immediately after hearing the door open, smiled politely and took out a notepad and a Muggle pen, which she struggled with a little. “Yes, I read about that; killed seven people, didn’t it? Six orphans and one adult?”

Sister Cole nodded solemnly. “It was very sudden –the source was never found. Probably one of the children foolish enough to play with matches in the middle of night.”

Nodding as she scribbled messily, Ginny observed the matron curiously. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to talk about your history with the orphanage, how you got here and perhaps any –er– memorable orphans you’ve encountered.”

“You wish to know how an ancient could possibly have the competence to run such a large facility?”

“What? No –”

Sister Cole dismissed this with a wave of her hand. “No matter. It’s true, you know. I’ve been with this orphanage since 1925; quite some time. I married very young, as was the custom back then, but –well– it fell apart, as well as funding for this orphanage. By that time, I was in charge, and had the idea to enlist the Church’s help on matters, eventually entering into the sisterhood myself. I’ve never left.”

Ginny hesitated, tapping her pen absently. “Cool. Er, just out of curiosity –I think a man who used to go to my school lived here? Tom Riddle?”

The matron’s eyes sharpened immediately, and her polite distance disappeared as her face hardened. “Riddle? But he must be nearly seventy. How –”

“He’s pretty infamous at our school,” Ginny said quickly. “He’s made a huge impact on many of the people who go there, even the younger generation. I was just wondering if you remembered –”

“Of course I remember him,” Sister Cole said sharply. “Tom Riddle is not a child you easily forget. Didn’t get a day’s rest when he was here, especially as he got older . . . strange things were always happening, disappearances, lost memories –” She shook her head. “I went blind, once, for a day. When I regained my eyesight, two boys hung on a string from the roo –” She paused.

“Yes?”

“You are reporters, aren’t you?” the matron demanded. “Not government, or one of –”

“No, we’re not,” Ginny reassured hastily. “Honestly, we’re just here for a brief, informational article, not a gossip column.”

However, Sister Cole’s thin fingers snaked around her cane tightly, clearly unconvinced. Harry noted the movement and exchanged a worried glance with Hermione, hoping that Violet and Neville were having better luck.

“Get off my foot, you git!”

“Shut it, Violet.”

“Quiet, we’ll get caught!”

“You star –”

“Don’t go there.”

Violet and Neville continued walking in sulking silence, dancing around each other’s feet with difficulty, considering Neville’s natural clumsiness and their forced proximity.

“Would be nice if we were twelve,” Violet muttered.

“Then we wouldn’t be here, would we?”

Violet bit back a scream of frustration, afraid that her wandering mind might hinder her concentration in sensing a pocket of magic. “You’re so bloody distracting,” she muttered, straining every nerve in her body to pick up that faint hum, shuddering through her body with familiarity. But part of her wanted to resist it, this dark, seducing music, a lustful tinge of ancient magic, feeding her right to it.

Her partner stopped, eyeing her nervously. “Are –are you alright?”

“Of course. Why?”

“You look –never mind.”

Violet turned her head curiously, and felt a cold sense of déjà vu when she saw the look in Neville’s eyes. It seemed so familiar, that horrified fear and wariness, but she couldn’t place when she’d seen it last, directed towards her.

She jumped and whimpered when she heard a drop of water, remembering another time when she’d lain on a damp, cold floor, her body weak and drained as she heard nothing but dripping water, until that taunting voice came to life, until phoenix’s song brought her back to her warm bed, soft covers, and real flesh.

“Let’s keep going,” she said, taking a step forward. But when they turned the corner, they found the source of the water: a boy mesmerized by the cup of water he was slowly draining.

He yelped when he saw them, terrified eyes transfixed upon their ghostly feet. On pure instinct, Violet threw the Invisibility Cloak off her, treading carefully towards the boy.

"It's okay," she said.

"Gh –ghosts!"

"No, not ghosts, just magicians. You know, like Houdini?"

"Magicians?" he asked mistrustfully, eyeing the spot where Neville stood hidden. "I saw two."

Neville appeared out of nowhere, helplessly shrugging. "Boo?"

The boy stared at him for a moment before his gaze returned to Violet. "Are you here for the ghouls?"

"What gho –"

"Yes," Violet interrupted, silencing Neville with a look. "We're here for the ghouls. What can you tell me about them?"

The boy tipped his cup over until the last drop fell to the floor. "Been here forever. You can hear them banging and moaning from this room; it's always been locked, and even the nuns can't open it. They tried sawing through it, but every time anyone gets close, they get real cold and run away. I knew a kid who tried to go in on a dare, and got sucked in through the door. Poor bugger, nobody's seen him since."

Neville and Violet exchanged glances. "What's your name?"

"Ralph."

"Can you show us where this door is, Ralph?"

He froze. "Er –"

"We can't get rid of the ghouls if we don't know where to go."

Ralph nodded and guided them through the loud, bustling orphanage to a disturbingly silent corridor, their echoing footsteps following behind them like shadows. He stopped halfway down and pointed at the door directly ahead of them at the end of the corridor.

“There. That’s where he disappeared.”

“Ralph, you can’t tell anyone that we’re here, okay?” Violet said. “Can you keep this a secret?”

He nodded, and practically ran in the opposite direction, back to the warmth of his Muggle world.

“I didn’t think he’d believe us so easily.”

“He’s still a kid,” Violet explained, ignoring the twitch in her leg. “He hasn’t lost the sense.”

“Sense?”

“Of magic, of something he can’t understand.” But Violet wasn’t paying attention to Neville anymore. The twitch had become a command, her feet longing to lift and step, to breach the distance between her and the strange, dark aura of the door, a cloud of familiar voices whispering into her ears.

“Violet? Vi?”

Neville’s voice sounded muffled as she took one more step, the bond growing more powerful with each increasing inch.

“We should get the others.”

She remembered the feel of the rooster’s throbbing throat beneath her fingertips, the rapidly beating heart of a creature that knew what was about to happen.

“—can’t do —alone.”

The blood never seemed to come off, even after she had been rescued from the Chamber.

“Violet!”

She jerked violently when Neville grabbed her arm, the echoes fading away. She hated herself for wanting to reach for them again.

“What the hell was that?”

“Sorry,” she muttered.

“Vi?”

“I’m sorry, okay? Drop it.” She couldn’t look at him, intense shame overwhelming her negative feelings towards him. He was a cowardly jerk, but what did that make her, allowing herself to be swayed by the same power that did five years ago?

“What do you think?”

“What?”

Neville gestured to the door.

Violet looked past him, away from wary eyes and dark magic. “It’s Voldemort’s doing. It’s got to be there.”

“Should we get Harry and them?”

Violet shrugged. “They’re probably still interviewing; how are we going to sneak them all here too?”

“You think we should go alone?” Neville asked skeptically.

She nodded. “If it looks like something we can’t handle, we can just go back.”

“I think that’s a stupid idea.”

“Got to learn how to step outside diapers sometime, Neville.”

He flushed angrily. “How do I know you won’t turn on me? You’re susceptible; you’ll probably attack me like you did the last time –”

“Me, susceptible?” Violet laughed harshly, unlike herself. “I’m not the one with the ugly scar on his forehead.” She flicked the lightning bolt cruelly, rubbing in his tragedy.

Neville’s eyes flashed. “You’re weak. Weak and pathetic.”

“At least I don’t cry for my mMummy whenever someone actually challenges me.”

“Really?” Neville shot back. “I seem to remember you bawling your eyes out for your Mum a week ago. Still can’t get the tear stains off my good sweater –”

She stiffened. “What?”

Neville paused, eyes widening in horror. “Violet, I –”

“You bastard,” she hissed. “You –” Violet turned around and began running to the end of the corridor, towards the door that became darker and darker as she approached, until the faded wood became black and transparent. She distantly heard Neville calling her name, cursing as his rapid footsteps joined hers. Her legs didn’t seem to want to stop, and she found herself running through the door just as Neville’s arm caught her elbow, both of them stumbling through.

The room was completely dark save for the sole green light bulb faintly illuminating them. Neville turned around to find a door without a knob, pounding on the wood uselessly before attempting to blast it open with various spells.

“You idiot,” he panted. “You complete, utter idiot.”

Violet shivered as she eyed the green light nervously, feeling Neville stiffen beside her. How stupid could she have been? That whole corridor was enchanted, designed to prey upon people, to choose

those who went inside. But it only encouraged their stupid fight; it didn't start it.

Drip.

She felt like curling into herself, wishing desperately for her Mum in that dark, vast basement. This isn't real, she reminded herself as she shook. It's all just an illusion, a dream. We're not really here, alone in this place, with the never ending darkness.

Still, she backed up against the door, her breathing shallow as a rooster's sharp, vengeful call echoed throughout the room. Violet screamed and covered her ears, not noticing the tendrils of shadowy hands encircling themselves around her chest.

"Lumos!"

Bright light erupted from Neville's wand, blinding her for a brief moment before the shadows faded away. She leaned against the door shaking, cursing her own weakness, how the strength of her thoughts was not enough to destroy the illusion.

Neville supported her elbow with such gentleness that it surprised her. Violet curled her fingers around her own wand, feeling the reassuring warmth of the dragon heart string's magic stop her shaking hand. If Neville could be brave now, she'd be damned if she would cower again.

"Fools."

They turned to the center of the room, where a young boy stood, his blonde hair twisted eerily in the green light. His arms were crossed against his chest, an arrogant, knowing smirk spread across his pale face. But those eyes –

The red slits shifted like a snake's, possessed and demented as it stared out at the intruders.

"I knew you'd come, sometime. Half-blood filth," he spat, glaring at Violet. "The boy, however...you've been marked. I sense him inside of you –both of you."

"Sense who?" Neville asked, but Violet knew.

"Voldemort," she whispered.

Red eyes flashed indignantly. "You dare to speak his name?"

"You're nothing," Violet spat, taking a step forward. "Only an illusion of the past, a parasite."

He watched Violet, evaluating her. "I'm only as real as you want me to be. Or rather, he wants me to be."

"What does that mean?" Neville demanded. "Where's the Horcrux?"

He laughed. "This is the best of Dumbledore's lot? A pair of idiotic teenagers? The Dark Lord will surely prevail with ease."

Violet descended the stairs that separated them and the monstrosity, a rush of courage flowing through her. "I'm not afraid of you."

The boy smirked. "But you're afraid for this to end, aren't you? For your world to come crashing around you?"

"It already is," Violet said softly, glad that Neville had followed her down the stairs. "But it'll go no further."

"It's not in your power to cause change."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Neville was now standing beside her, his wand twirling between his fingers. How to defeat this unidentified creature was certainly not something he had been taught in the Hogwarts textbook, yet Violet seemed to have some sense of what was going on. He followed her lead, trying to find some sort of weakness in the monster.

He looked at the light bulb, recognizing the strangely powerful energy coming from it. Remembering the feel of the Diary as he, Dumbledore, and the phoenix approached a crazed, white eyed Violet and an almost solid Tom Riddle, Neville wondered if maybe, just maybe –

“Fracta!”

The boy screamed as the green light bulb shattered into tiny pieces, the sole source of light gone. Neville and Violet shuddered as unseen fog circled them, entering their trembling hearts and dragging the darkness out.

Susceptible...you're susceptible...Violet heard the rooster's cries again, watched the Slytherin girl Helen's soul be consumed as the Dementors danced gracefully around her, imagined how her mother had died, remembered the ghost Lily's words to her. Her head felt like it was about to split in half, her heart on the verge of exploding from her chest.

Coward...Neville heard his mother's screams, his father's defiant cry as he fought what he knew to be a losing battle. He heard his own infant wails as green light flashed towards him, the intense pain in his forehead as a jagged lightning bolt carved itself permanently into his flesh. He thought he could feel the scar expanding until it had divided his face in half, reminding him of his failures.

The blonde boy, the same who'd fallen through the door years ago, knew only pain.

Suddenly, the room became visible as water splashed with deceiving ease around their ankles.

“What?” Neville said, staring at the familiar surroundings in wonder.

Violet, however, closed her eyes in horror, wishing desperately that this wasn't real.

“The Chamber. Violet, it's –it's us.”

She opened her eyes, taking in the sight of her limp, eleven-year-old body, the abomination standing beside her, reveling in her life energy, and the approaching figures of an enraged, powerful Dumbledore, nervous Neville, and a beautiful phoenix singing as it flew over them. She remembered this.

Tom Riddle scowled at the phoenix's song, a hint of fear in his eyes as he gazed upon Dumbledore.

Violet shook, the reassurance that this was an illusion failing miserably. She knew what would happen next, and the intense shame at the memory, the perversion of her mind and the violation of her body overcoming the knowledge that this wasn't happening, not now.

"Too late, Professor," Riddle gloated, sighing in pleasure as he solidified. "There's nothing left to salvage."

Dumbledore towered like a column, blue eyes cold behind half moon spectacles. "No."

That single word seemed to force the smirk to fall from Riddle's face, a flash of uncertainty in his eyes. "You can't reverse this, Dumbledore."

"I know."

Confusion twisted Riddle's handsome face for a moment before he picked up Violet's wand. "Then you won't mind when I suck her dry." Violet's body glowed as she shuddered, lurching forward as it fought Riddle –

"No!" Both Nevilles cried as both sent a basic Stupefy towards the dark-haired teenager. Only one struck true, and the drain was interrupted. Riddle stumbled backwards, annoyed as he noticed twelve-year-old Neville for the first time.

"So," he spat. "This is the boy who defeats me?"

Both the older Neville and Violet flinched when they heard the hissing, knowing what was about to come. The basilisk slithered its way towards them, barely avoiding crushing Violet's still body.

"The basilisk, my true inheritance."

But Dumbledore didn't seem fazed. "Don't look into its eyes," he instructed Neville, who immediately looked away. He gestured to the bird above, who swooped down and pecked out the snake's eyes, both it and Riddle screaming in frustration.

Violet sank down to her knees, hugging them as she watched the battle from the water's reflection. The phoenix continued circling around the basilisk, attacking its head while Riddle struggled to throw curses with Violet's wand.

"What is this?" he demanded, flowers sprouting from the wood as he attempted to cast an Unforgivable.

Dumbledore only smiled. "The wand knows you are not its owner."

Riddle looked up at Dumbledore in wonder, the naïve student again. "But other wands don't —"

"Not all witches have a mother brilliant at charms."

"And now, Tom, we say goodbye, not for the last time." Dumbledore summoned the Diary from beside Violet, ignoring Riddle's attempts to snatch it back, and performed a spell that created gaping holes in the book; they reflected in Riddle as he became transparent once again, staring at his own hands in horror. With one final, frustrated scream, Riddle disappeared, leaving a very confused basilisk. Having hit its flying opponent into the opposite wall, it lunged for the Headmaster, who grabbed Neville and ran sharply to the left, barely avoiding its deadly fangs.

Dumbledore muttered something under his breath and the basilisk choked, its thick tail flailing around helplessly as it suffocated, until finally its great head came crashing down, sending a wave of water over the pair.

"Is –is it dead?" Neville squeaked.

"Yes," Dumbledore said tiredly. "It is."

"Professor, Violet?"

"I don't know, Neville."

Dumbledore walked towards Violet's body, closely followed by Neville, who gripped his wand helplessly. Neville watched his younger self's still shoulders and remembered how he'd hated himself in that moment for allowing his childhood friend to –

"Miss Potter? Violet?" Dumbledore gently shook Violet's shoulders, disturbed by how pale she was. "Enervate."

Green eyes bulged as Violet's chest heaved, sitting herself up. However, the emerald tint seemed dulled as she blinked rapidly, staring through Dumbledore and Neville instead of looking at them.

"Violet?" Neville called tentatively. Violet's eyes focused on him, and Neville visibly relaxed. "Thank Merlin, I thought you were –"

With an inhuman screech, Violet launched herself at Neville, hissing and scratching wildly. Neville gaped, rooted to the ground in shock, and it was only Dumbledore's quick Stunner that saved him from being mauled. He stared at Violet in horror, her body twitching despite being Stunned.

"P –Professor?"

Dumbledore's eyes dulled gravely. "He had taken too much, even before we got here."

"Can –can you change her back?" Neville whispered, rubbing sweaty hands on his damp robes.

Dumbledore thought for a moment before slowly nodding his head. "Yes, there's something we can do. But it'll take as much as give."

The scene faded away until fog surrounded them again, and the blonde boy eyed a crouching Violet maliciously.

“Don’t you see? Don’t you see how useless, how ineffective, your efforts are? How can you expect a monster to save others from the greatest monster of all?”

“That wasn’t Violet’s fault,” Neville said loudly, angry red sparks flying from his wand. “It’s V –Voldemort’s.” Violet looked up. Neville never calls him that.

The boy smiled crookedly. “Yet you never wondered how they cured the insanity?”

Their silence was enough of an answer for him. His smile grew until it twisted the cute, boyish features into something entirely different. “Dark magic. Only the Dark Arts can cure what the Dark Arts wrought.”

“That’s a lie!” Neville shouted. “Dumbledore would never –”

“But he didn’t want you to be there, did he? Didn’t want to risk exposing the Golden Boy to what he should be fighting against, not endorsing.”

“It was the family’s decision.”

“Aren’t you as good as family?” he retorted slyly.

Neville froze and looked away, realizing that Violet hadn’t said a word yet.

“And you. Oh, you shouldn’t think you’re off the hook either. Shame you ended up such a coward, with your parents sacrificing their lives for yours and all. Of course, that’s just a minor detail, innit?”

“You shut –”

“Afraid to admit the truth? You saw it just now –Dumbledore did all the real work, you just stood by like a good little boy and allowed your Headmaster to bear the danger.”

“I tried to Stun him,” Neville said, but admitting that tiny action aloud only made him feel more stupid. “I was only twelve, for Merlin’s sake! What else was I supposed to do?”

“Grow a spine.” The blonde grinned. “Certain people are allowed to enter the door, but only the worthy can retrieve this Horcrux you seek so desperately. Tell me; what makes a coward and a weakling worthy of such a privilege? Like I said, you’re the wrong people to have been sent to retrieve it. Both of you reek of so much Dark magic that it almost hurts; these are the representatives for the Light? A pair of misfits with shady pasts and a future full of failure? An orphan and a black sheep, what a lovely iro –”

“No.”

He glared, irritated at been interrupted. “What?”

Violet stood up, gripping her wand in hand. “No. Neville’s not an orphan, not really, not when he has people who love him, as much as we hate him sometimes. Most times. I’m no black sheep, either, so quit acting like you know us, because you don’t. How would you? You’ve been trapped in this basement for so long, you and your words are nothing but half-assed steam right now.” She laughed loudly, with deliberate arrogance. “Some guardian you are.”

He looked taken aback for a moment, trying to quickly regain his posture. “Of course I know everything; I’ve been entrusted with the Horcrux, I see and know everything that goes on. I’m omniscient and _”

“Do you ever shut up?” Violet asked, sighing loudly. “Merlin, you almost talk as much as Binns.”

“I don’t think you have a right to judge me when –”

“You don’t really know how they saved me, do you?”

“The Dark Arts, of course.”

Violet shook her head. “How could you know? You feed only on the worst memories, and how I was able to come back was certainly not an act of evil. It was love.”

Neville looked up, remembering Dumbledore’s own words to him, how his mother’s love ran in his veins, protecting him from the one who would kill him again.

“You heard it for yourselves!” the boy shrieked. “Take as much as give.”

“They gave parts of themselves for me,” Violet said quietly. “Mum, Dad, Harry...they gave me another chance, in more ways than one.”

“Delusions,” he concluded. “Hopes and dreams for the guilty mind. You and I both know the truth –” He screamed as a Cutting Curse sliced his shoulder, staring at Neville in disbelief.

“Go back to the hole you crawled from.”

Violet stepped forward, joining Neville. “Almost had us for a moment,” she said. “But not anymore. Not ever. Neville?” He nodded, and they raised their wands together.

“Expello!”

Screams echoed as the fog dissipated, bringing them back to the dark storage room. The boy clutched his hair in agony, black shadows expelling through his nose, ears, and mouth. Violet watched impassively, wondering if they could salvage the monster’s vessel, the poor boy who’d stumbled in here years ago.

“Vi, look!”

She raised her head to the ceiling, eyes widening as something floated down to them from where the green light bulb had been. An ornate cup, golden and grand, came down to rest gently in Violet’s

hands. She gasped, noting the badger engraving in the center, exchanging glances with Neville.

“Helga Hufflepuff,” Neville whispered. “Dumbledore was right.”

“What?”

“Dumbledore predicted that this was one of the Horcruxes –we’ve got to destroy it.”

“But how? It must be protected.”

Another scream caused Violet to jump, turning to face the boy twisting and turning on the floor, his limbs twitching horribly. “Do it now.”

She placed the cup on the floor, praying that all the things they’d just went through were the only security measures for this Horcrux.

“Flatus!”

They covered their arms as the cup blasted apart, the broken pieces hissing as it turned coal black. Sighing collectively, they grinned stupidly at each other. The worst was over now.

“Fools.”

The blonde boy laughed, struggling to stand even as smoke continued trailing from his nostrils. “You won’t live to seek the others.”

Violet screamed as Hufflepuff’s cup burst into towering flames, suffocating smoke consuming the room as the walls quickly became alit with harsh light. Beyond the smoke, she could see the boy collapsing to the ground, eyes wild as his limbs twitched and writhed as he tried to crawl to the stairs.

Neville grabbed Violet’s arm as he bolted for the door, but she threw him off.

“Come on!”

“Wait!” Violet shouted, turning towards the boy, whose pant leg had caught on fire. There was no way he was in any condition to escape.

She felt her heart contract as she stared at the blonde boy, thrashing and screaming as she had years ago, his mind and heart drained to insanity. She could leave him here, where he may burn with the building or be rescued and condemned to a horrible life, or –

He was what she could have been, and watching his mouth foaming and eyes bulging in pain and confusion, Violet found herself forgetting that she shouldn't care. She had been saved only because she had family who loved her, loved her enough to give parts of themselves to revive her soul. He was an orphan, one who nobody had been willing to brave the wretched door for after he disappeared. Nobody to care enough to attempt a rescue, to save him.

But Violet would, in the only acceptable way out he had.

She gathered the darkness in her heart, remembering how it felt when Tom Riddle was inside her, whispering and seducing her with his dark, malicious words. It's for good, she thought. It's for his good.

She pointed her wand at the writhing boy, bracing herself for what she was about to do.

“Avada Kedavra.”

Turning around to a shocked Neville, she pushed past him to the door, turning the newly appeared doorknob and running down the corridor, angry flames chasing them all the way.

But she wasn't thinking about that as Neville's feet ran alongside hers. She couldn't dwell on the heat trailing behind them or the broken Horcrux that had caused it. No, Violet's thoughts were consumed by wild eyes and green light, with second chances and lost causes, tears stinging the corner of bright emerald eyes.

What would Mum think of her now?

“Do you smell that?”

Sister Cole looked up, crow eyes becoming more prominent as her eyebrows knitted together. "Smoke, but why –?"

"Sister!" A frantic teenager yanked the door open, panting heavily. "A fire –east corridor –"

"Get everybody out," the aged nun ordered before turning to her guests. "You'd better get yourselves going."

The trio shook their heads, Harry gazing at the open door anxiously. Neville and Violet were somewhere in this building by themselves; there was no way he would leave without assuring their safety.

"You've got limited staff," Ginny pointed out. "We'll help."

Sister Cole nodded and staggered out of the room, leaning heavily on her cane. "Lydia, gather everyone on the third floor. You three cover the second and first." Sister Cole sighed in frustration. "I wish I could help, but –"

"Help by calling the police," Hermione said quickly, "and hurry!"

Lydia handed her cell phone to the matron, who quickly limped outside. "Try to save as many as you can, but if it seems like the walls will collapse, get out of there," she said. "Don't be heroes."

With that, they separated, Hermione and Ginny sprinting up the stairs while Harry ran along the corridor, directing the screaming, confused orphans the right way, kicking open each door along his way.

"Violet! Neville!" he bellowed, hoping to Merlin that they were safe. If they get caught in this fire, he'd never forgive himself. He was just about to cast a Point Me spell when a loud scuffling noise made him hastily pocket his wand again.

"Help! Please, someone!"

Harry ran towards the source of the yelling, finding himself face to face with a disheveled boy. "What's wrong?"

"It's my sister, Delia," he explained frantically. "I –I don't know where she is!"

"Calm down," Harry said gently. "She might have already run out."

"No, no, you don't get it; she went back to look for Mr. Fluffypants."

Harry stared. "Who?"

"Her pet rat. I got pushed back in the crowd and she was gone. I've been waiting, but she hasn't –oh, God, she can't die too –"

"Alright, you get yourself out of here; I'll go back and look for her." Harry could use magic to find her location, but not in front of this kid.

He looked like he was about to argue, but his shoulders fell, resigned. "Please find her."

Harry nodded. "I will."

He turned around, made sure the kid was gone, and drew his wand.

"Point me Delia."

Peter coughed, fighting his way through the smoke. How did he get stuck in this disaster? One minute he was a rat, his back roughly caressed by an overenthusiastic brat, and the next pandemonium erupted, tiny feet creating waves of noise. He'd used the advantage to make a quick getaway, but now found himself in his human form, far too big and tall to see through the smog.

His hand found the cheap brass doorknob, leaping back in pain as the heat burned his fingers. Peter turned, frowning at what he thought was the sound of crying. To his surprise, he found his captor sniffing, caught under an overturned bed as her nails scratched helplessly at the floorboards.

"Peter."

He paused, eyes widening in panic. How did she know that? But he relaxed when he recalled that her brother, too, bore that name.

“Peter.”

Flinching at the pitiful sound, he resisted the memory of another time, another girl, which only brought his mind back to soulful green eyes, a powerful spitfire of a woman eliminated with two mere words. He remembered the ghost, leaning casually against her own tombstone as her eyes sparkled with knowledge. Traitor.

“Peter!”

“Shut up!” he screamed, pivoting around fiercely. “Shut –”

The little girl, Delia, struggled once again with the iron frame pinning her to the ground. “Please help me,” she whispered, eyelids dropping as she coughed.

She would die, Peter realized, if he left her here. If not from smoke inhalation, then by having her skin consumed by the fire, a fate he would not have wished upon anyone, especially a little girl –even if she had given him that ridiculous name.

Standing off to the side, he hesitated, halfway to the door and freedom, to the girl and the bed. He didn’t have his wand, what good could he do anyway? He’d always been stubby and fat, not strong and lean like James or Sirius. There was nothing he could do.

But he heard the little cries like a broken clock, weaker and weaker as the wheels within slowed, dying with one last moan. A lonely groan, attention deprived and desperate to be heard, to be fixed.

What is there left to repair?

Peter coughed as he fought through the smoke, his lungs and weak heart contracting painfully until his fingers touched iron, already hot as they burned his fingers. His lazy muscles ached as he attempted to overturn the bed, but to his surprise found it actually giving way. Feather light, no longer burdened by the weight, Peter stepped back

and watched as the little girl wriggled out of the space, the bed floating on its own.

It was all he could do to remember the danger. “Wandless magic,” he whispered in awe. He’d never been able to manage it, not in a productive way. Everything he touched, uncontrolled, seemed to fall into ashes.

“M –My brother,” Delia coughed, her little heart shaped face white and shiny. “Where’s my brother?”

“He got out,” Peter said, nervously glancing at the door. “We’ve got to go.” He grabbed the girl’s arm, not unkindly, and was surprised when she wrenched her arm out of his grasp.

“Mr. Fluffypants!” she cried, looking around the room rapidly. “He’ll – he’ll die!”

“Mr. –” Peter paused. “Fluffypants is fine. Rats always manage to wriggle their way out of bad situations.”

He reclaimed her arm with urgency and pulled the little girl out into the smoking corridor, the fire already licking the walls ahead of them. “Cover your nose!” he instructed, pulling his shirt to his face as he led the girl into a run. It was only when they reached the crossway between the flames and the corridor when he spotted the two figures heading for the exit as well.

Peter stopped in his tracks, for a moment forgetting about the fire, about the danger, about the little girl pulling on his arm. Fiery red hair, familiar and nostalgic, paused and peered out at them, the owner’s face twisting into hatred.

“Violet.”

The Longbottom boy had noticed them as well, but tugged on his friend’s arm, jerking his head towards the fire, then the exit. With a sinking stomach, he saw Harry’s figure rushing towards them as well, his wand outstretched in front of him.

A few months ago he would have been overjoyed to see them there.

“Get away from that girl!” Violet yelled, her voice hoarse and distant over the roar of the fire.

“Go with them, Delia,” he instructed, giving her a little push.

“But –”

Peter shoved her out of the way of Harry’s Cutting Curse, throwing himself to the ground as well. He distantly heard his nephew’s curses, his cold green eyes giving away the words Peter couldn’t hear.

“Bulgaria!” Peter shouted, hoping that the rumor was true. He’d already done so much to their family, his family. “Another Horcrux. Find it.” Before he could gauge their reactions, or even if they’d heard, he shrunk down to the rat, narrowly avoiding Violet and Harry’s bright curses, recognizing some of the malicious hues. One yellow spell grazed his back; it burned like hot wax, but he ignored it and scurried towards the flames, hoping they weren’t stupid enough to follow him.

Violet moved as if to chase him, but Longbottom grabbed her sleeve and forced her to leave, taking Delia with them. Wormtail slipped out from the shadows and followed, staying a decent distance away. Quickening his pace as they thrust open the door, he entered the deceiving sunshine and took a sharp left, running in the shade until he’d reached the sewers, descending into the darkness and stink of the condemned.

He’d meant well, he really had.

Sirens blared around Ginny, blinding red lights flashing in her eyes as Harry, Violet, Neville, and a girl stumbled out of the burning building, their faces black, drained, and angry. She and Hermione exhaled sighs of relief and ran towards them, leading the group towards the fire people, as well as Ron and Luna, who had abandoned their stations to gather the kids together. Lydia cried out when she saw Delia, immediately whisking her away and shoving a clear, plastic mask over her mouth, instructing her to breathe deeply.

Ginny embraced Harry and Violet enthusiastically, but their tense, miserable postures worried her deeply. She put a hand on Neville's shoulder, smiling at him, before subdued sniffing caught her attention.

Sister Cole was a sad sight, her crooked body leaning heavily on her cane, her hands white and shaking. Hesitantly, Ginny walked towards the matron, stepping out the way of a yellow uniformed Muggle, equipped with a huge, thick string.

"Er –Sister Cole?"

"Gone. It's all gone."

Ginny's hand hesitated above her shoulder. "Can't you rebuild?"

Her aged head nodded slowly. "It costs money. This'll be the second time I've had to appeal for a grant; I'm not sure they will consider this old place a worthy investment."

"Maybe –maybe it was for the best. Getting rid of old ghosts and all. Maybe you can finally start fresh again, without any baggage."

Sister Cole straightened, and Ginny retracted her hand. "You lot aren't reporters, are you?"

Ginny hesitated. "No, we're not."

"Do you have anything to do with Tom Riddle? Did this...misfortune concern him?"

"Yeah. We were trying to get rid of the thing that caused it."

The matron sighed and turned her tired body towards her. "Then perhaps it was for the best. I always knew that boy was bad news."

Ginny felt overwhelmed with guilt. They'd taken out the Horcrux, presumably, but look at what it had caused. Perhaps it was Tom Riddle's ultimate plan after all –should he lose that precious treasure, that split soul, he wanted to go down with a fight, causing as much pain and destruction as possible. She would never have believed a

human being to be so destructive, so spiteful of all the life around him, but that was before Lord Voldemort wreaked havoc on her world, stole her brother's life.

"I'm sorry," she croaked. "I'm so sorry. We didn't know this would happen."

Sister Cole scrutinized her carefully. "But he's hurt you too, hasn't he?" she asked gently. "Tom."

"Yes."

"Promise me something, won't you, Jenny?"

"Ginny."

"Ginny. That's a nice name. Short for Virginia?"

"Ginevra, actually."

"Ginevra, then. Promise me you'll stop him, whatever he's doing. I don't want anyone else to lose."

"I promise." Her voice shook, but the whisper seemed to contain power in it, a power different from the magic she was used to.

Perhaps Muggles weren't as different from wizards as she'd thought.

Lydia approached, and Ginny made a quiet exit, allowing her assistant to take over with consoling words. She walked over to her friends, who were taking turns breathing deeply into the plastic masks, with determined conviction.

"Please tell me you destroyed it."

Violet coughed and looked up with tired eyes. "Yeah," she responded, her voice strangely hollow. "He's gone."

But Ginny ignored her exhaustion. "Where next?"

“Next?”

“The Horcrux.”

“Bulgaria,” Harry said. “We’ve got to go to Bulgaria.”

Violet’s head turned so fast all Ginny could see was a red blur. “Are you kidding me, Harry? You’re actually going to –”

“There’s no reason he would lie now.”

“How about leading us into a trap?”

Ginny watched, extremely confused as Harry steadily met his sister’s eyes with slight harshness. “We’re going.”

Violet bit her lip, but merely looked back at the trails of smoke floating above the orphanage. “Fine,” she muttered. “But don’t blame me if someone dies.”

Nobody acknowledged her quiet words, but Ginny heard, sending chills down her back.

“I think you’re forgetting that Bulgaria’s a country, not a city,” Hermione pointed out. “There’s no way we could scour –”

“Write to Krum, Hermione,” Harry said. “His school’s full of Dark Arts; maybe he knows something.”

Hermione blinked. “K –Krum? Why should I write to him?”

“Well, you’re pen pals, aren’t you?” Harry said irritably.

“When have she ever talked to him?” Ron asked in a strange tone.

Harry seemed to realize his mistake. “I –sorry, Hermione, I’m not thinking right; must be all that smoke inside...”

“I can write him,” Neville said. “He was decent enough to me. I’m sure he wouldn’t ignore it.”

Sighing visibly in relief, Harry nodded his head in consent. “Do that, and send it out with an owl.” He cocked his head and listened to the nearing sirens and the flashing blue lights turning the corner. “C’mon, we’ve got to get back.”

They slipped through the busy firemen and gathered in a secluded alley for Apparition. The rest popped back to the motel, but Violet’s tight grip on Harry’s arm stopped him from following.

“Are you sure we want to do this, trust that –that traitor?”

Harry stared at the dark brick in front of him, entranced with its strange paradox of smooth texture and rough indents. He could still smell the smoke and fear on both of them.

“Harry?”

“We’re going to Bulgaria,” he said. “That’s the only lead we have right now, and we’re taking it. He owes me a life-debt, and this Wormtail was ‘Uncle Peter’ for a lot longer than he’d been with me. I think he was sincerely trying to help.”

“Bulgaria, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Violet’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “I just hope we don’t fall off an ice cliff.”

“We won’t,” Harry reassured, grabbing her arm for the Side-Along Apparition. “We’ll fly through it.”

With a loud pop, they disappeared, leaving behind smoke and ruin, determined to stop what was to come before flame licked match.

James stared at the piece of parchment clutched between his fingertips, registering the familiar scrawl, the unusual candor of its contents. A part of him wanted to tear it to shreds, viciously imagining it to be the writer's face, but he also wanted to believe it. He couldn't really have gone so far as to set a deliberate trap for them, could they? Did nearly three decades of friendship count for so little?

The kids are in Bulgaria. Help them find the other Horcruxes. Burn this letter. –Peter

If it were anyone else, James would have thought his old friend was sprouting off nonsense, but Dumbledore had explained; the Marauders and Lily had been part of a circle of very few who had known about the Horcruxes, and what Voldemort had been truly after.

So here he was again, sitting on the couch with his head in his hands, awaiting his friends' arrival. This time, he didn't think Sirius would be enough, but luckily for him, Remus had just returned from his mission, having been exposed and barely making it out of that wolf den with his life. Still, he insisted that he may have still made a difference to the younger werewolves, given them hope for a better future.

But Remus's justifications sounded like distant hope in itself, so James wasn't sure if he could trust his old friend's words. Remus never told anyone when he was troubled, unless asked to his face.

"Speak of the devil," James muttered as his fireplace glowed green, feeling a pang of sorrow as he recalled that blasted Muggle phrase Lily had unintentionally ingrained in his head. They used to joke that the wizarding equivalent was "Speak of the Grindelow" or "Speak of the Boggart." Yet none of their numerous inserts seemed to properly express the dark seduction of the original phrase.

Perhaps "Speak of the Voldemort" would be more adequate.

"James."

He finally looked up at Remus's weary voice, sandy hair streaked with new grey and tall figure slouched against the wall. Sirius, too,

seemed unlike himself, a dark look cast across the shadows of his face. James stood up, hands inside his pockets as he nodded at his best friends; the lump in his throat didn't allow him to do much more.

"I'll kill him."

Both Remus and James focused their attention on their third friend, his hands shaking in anger as he gripped the fireplace mantel with unwarranted strength.

"Padfoot –"

"The Tracking Charm worked, Prongs," Sirius said angrily. "It worked, and we followed him as far as some Muggle orphanage before he Apparated out and we lost the signal. Apparently it had just burnt down when we got there, and when I talked to the matron in charge she said that a boy matching Harry's description had just been there moments – moments, James– before we were, that he was looking for something Tom Riddle had hidden there."

James looked up. "Tom Riddle? Isn't that –"

"Voldemort's name? Yeah."

"Either Peter led them there, or he followed for his own reasons," Remus said quietly.

"I'll never forgive him." Sirius clenched his teeth. "Especially if something happens to Harry or Vi. The matron didn't know where they'd gone, and the Charm won't work again until it's fully charged without any Apparition breaks in between. We don't even –"

"Bulgaria," James said tiredly. "They're in Bulgaria."

"Why the hell would they be in Bulgaria?"

James held the letter out. "Because Peter told them to go there."

“Bloody hell.” Sirius looked out the window and into the night, up at the stars that shone just as sleepily where his nephew and niece were. “It’s a trap.”

“Maybe not.”

James and Sirius stared at him with such incredulity that he met no resistance when he plucked Peter’s letter from Sirius’s fingers. He quickly scanned its contents before looking back up at his friends, a glimmer of hope in his weary eyes. “Perhaps Peter has better intentions than we’d thought.”

Sirius scoffed in disgust. “He’d hoped you’d forgive him, Moony. I told him there was no chance of that, but here you are —”

“I’m not forgiving him, Padfoot,” Remus said sharply. “I’m just trying to figure out why we’ve trusted him so much over these past few decades.”

“Don’t say that,” James said with a slight smile. “Makes us sound old.”

“Only one thing to do, then.”

James nodded. “Listen to Peter. For once.”

Remus sighed and looked out the window, his face solemn as the evening twilight illuminated the grim lines on his face. He leaned his forehead against the cool glass, remembering the crude pail of water dumped on his head two days into the second month of class. He smiled, recalling the looks on Sirius and James’s faces as he’d angrily sent sparks up their arses. They’d really accepted him, hadn’t they? Despite the fact that Remus rarely lost his temper like that?

Their small friend had completed the quartet, nervous and shy around others yet loud and surprisingly sharp around his friends, finally comfortable in his skin. So why had he betrayed them, everything they’d meant to each other in those years of precious friendship? Sirius had angrily relayed Peter’s reasoning earlier, but Remus suspected it was a bit of a biased and edited version.

He would go for Harry and Violet, to make sure their parents wouldn't have to see their children buried under the ground, but he also hoped that he would encounter his old friend, to find out for himself, in Peter's own words, why. A second hand explanation was not good enough, and it never will be.

"We should tell the Order we're leaving."

His friends, brothers bonded by pranks, mistakes, broken hearts and joy, nodded with identically dark heads, all feeling the free space where a fourth should be.

The Marauders had lost a brother to the one force they'd never anticipated, but they felt little Peter's ghost filling the hole, urging them to believe in him, the eleven-year-old's face pinched as he proclaimed his brilliant plan to shove Snape into the frigid waters to bathe with the giant squid.

Remus snorted. Perhaps he'd initiate Peter's plan as a form of torture for Severus; no doubt he'd be due for a bath, sweating in those heavy Death Eater cloaks. He wrinkled his nose.

He must be going crazy.
"What were you thinking?"

"It worked, didn't it?"

Harry sighed, unconsciously rubbing where his scar used to be. "It was stupid. You could have easily gotten you and Neville killed."

"We managed."

"You were lucky."

"So were you."

Harry scowled. "Because of you –"

“We got the information we needed, and destroyed the Horcrux without any damage –except for the building, but it would have toppled down anyway.”

Violet glared at Harry defiantly. “It worked out, Harry, we’re fine. And I won’t do something like that again, because that definitely wasn’t fun at all.”

“Fun?” Harry repeated incredulously. “Fun? You think that all this is fun?”

“Of course, Harry. And Voldemort’s a fluffy puppy.”

“Don’t be sarcastic. You could have died. Your life isn’t worth that Horcrux.”

“But yours is?”

Harry hesitated and looked away. “Maybe. Maybe that’s all I’m good for.”

“No, it’s not! You’ve done loads of brilliant stuff before this –”

“All Voldemort related.”

“No,” she said fiercely, “not everything. You’re a good friend –”

“Not always.”

“–a good student– ”

“Only in Defense.”

“–and a good son.”

Harry met her gaze. “I let her die. Twice.”

“You were a baby, Harry, what could you have done? And b – before...maybe that was meant to happen, had to happen for certain things to progress. Maybe it’s –”

“Destiny?” His expression hardened. “Destiny. Out of all the idiotic concepts wizards and Muggles have created, destiny is the worst. If destiny causes a woman to die twice and a psycho to be resurrected by Wormtail –”

“Right, but without the Boy-Who-Lived, I wouldn’t have been conceived, Dad and Mum would have been killed or banished or something.”

“You don’t exist anyway.”

He didn’t flinch when Violet slapped him. “Think about it,” he said. “Someone would have killed Voldemort eventually. There’s nothing special about me.”

Violet bit her lips, flicking her fingers at the breeze. “Who would be brave enough to face him?”

“Dumbledore, you dolt.”

“Dumbledore had been a lot of things, but he hadn’t had what it took to kill Voldemort. Wound him, yeah –”

“And what do I have?” Harry sneered. “Love? Yeah, that’s right, I’ll love him to death, especially after he killed Mum and Dad, Sirius, Dumbledore, you –”

“You have people who love you. Voldemort and Dumbledore were alone.”

He scoffed. “Yeah, I bet Voldemort’s just been weeping over how lonely he is –”

“When you get that powerful, you can’t afford to be betrayed.” Violet ignored Harry’s irritated scowl. “Since you’re not necessarily up to their level –”

“Thanks for the ego boost.”

“—you still have that. Dumbledore...well, Dad’s always suspected that McGonagall and Dumbledore had some sort of affair, but I don’t know about that.”

Harry scowled, averting his eyes to the stormy sky behind her. “I know destiny exists,” he said quietly. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

Violet watched him uncross his arms and walk away with surprisingly soft footsteps trailed by a crack of thunder. She wrapped her arms around herself. Harry had her help, her tie to the world now, but what if everything changes? What if, instead of embracing the grounding support of his friends, he rejects them?

She stepped onto the balcony of their Bulgarian hotel, closed her eyes and raised her head to accept the droplets of rain. It felt so heavenly to just feel the water on her face, the steel beneath her fingertips.

Enjoy it while you can.

“No, please, it is an honor to help the Chosen One.”

Neville squirmed. “Don’t call me that.”

Krum cracked a grin, stretching the white scar on his upper lip. “You know, I had never thought you would have gotten through the Challenges. I was impressed, like now.”

Neville stood a little taller. “Oh, thanks.” He smiled uncertainly. “I —er— always thought you’d make it, so...”

But Krum only laughed and placed a calloused hand on Neville’s shoulders. “Do not worry! We are on the same side now.” His expression darkened. “I am no longer under the teacher’s curse.”

“That wasn’t him,” Harry and Neville said.

“Oh, it was,” Luna added. “But fake.”

All eyes fell on the wispy blonde.

“Well, he was.”

“So do you have any information?” Violet demanded.

Krum nodded. “Yes, but it is not something to be rushed into –”

“Whatever, it’s fine, let’s go.”

Ginny frowned. “Don’t be rude, Vi.”

“I know, I’m sorry, but it’s just that we’re running out of time! Voldemort’s going to cotton on sooner or later that we’re after the Horcruxes, and he’ll make sure we can’t destroy any more.”

Krum nodded. “She is right. We have been tracking down the Death Eaters in our own country, and –quite accidentally– stumbled on some information. They did not know much about the place, only that they were supposed to stay close to one area. So we captured most of them and searched the area. We recently found what we think is a magical pocket, but –”

Harry stared. “A what?”

“Magical pocket, Harry.” Hermione sighed. “A hidden gateway to another plane or location. It could be –sort of like a Portkey too, I guess. Really, we learned this in the Magical Myth unit in History of Magic!”

“The what unit?”

“If it’s a myth,” Ginny said slowly. “Then how do you know that’s really what it is?”

“Some of those in the Bulgarian branch of the Order were more superstitious and open minded than others.”

“Were?”

Krum nodded gravely. “Unfortunately they disappeared soon after discovering the pocket. We don’t know if they are alive or not.”

“I’m sorry.”

Krum nodded and turned to Neville. “You will destroy the Dark Lord, yes?”

“Well, I –”

“You must.”

“I know, Krum, I know. I’ll try.”

“Not ‘try,’ –do.”

Harry watched the exchange carefully, Krum’s conviction and Neville’s fear. He thought of all the sacrifices, all the deaths, all the pain.

I’ll win.

They made plans for Krum to take them to the pocket, arguing whether or not to alert the Order of the Phoenix to its presence.

“It’s the right thing,” Hermione insisted.

Ginny shook her head. “Our mums and dads would go ballistic –I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“I agree,” Violet said, “Best we do this ourselves.”

Both Luna and Ron nodded in agreement –Luna adding that they could take care of the Nargles themselves– but Neville merely watched, conflicted.

“Neville?”

He sighed. "Look, I know we got the Horcrux at the orphanage, but it was more blind luck more than anything. We were almost killed, and endangered loads of other people –Muggles, who don't –"

"This is our generation's fight."

"No." Neville scowled. "It's not. It's everyone's fight, I can't –we can't just go off and play the hero! Not without some sort of back-up."

"Look, mate," Ron said. "You've got us, so you're not alone, are you? The Order's got their hands tied as it is, holding the Death Eaters back; nobody knows what we're doing now, which means it's likely the Death Eaters don't either."

"Exactly, Ron. 'Likely.'"

"Neville's right," Hermione added. "We need some sort of plan."

"We do have a plan," Ginny protested. "And we can't do this without –"

"Neville, see some sense –"

"Shut it, Violet."

"No, Neville, you shut it. The Order is stretched thin, you know that. Their job is to fight back Voldemort's forces; ours is to destroy the Horcruxes." Her eyes flickered over to Harry. "It's what we have to do."

"There is no 'we'! None of you are –they were my parents, my bloody destiny –not yours. You'll get hurt, and I don't know if I'm strong enough to deal with that." Neville flushed, embarrassed, but didn't recoil when Harry placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

"Your parents, Neville?" Violet said quietly. "What about mine?"

"Don't forget Bill."

“I know you have your reasons, but –” Neville turned to his sole ally in frustration. “Hermione?”

She bit her lip. “I still think we should go to the adults on this, but – there’s no time.”

Ginny nodded. “Voldemort’s getting stronger every day.”

“All right then. Lead the way, Krum.”

The international Quidditch star held out a broken watch. “Portkey,” he explained. “It will take us to the pocket.”

Harry felt the familiar tug from behind his navel as they landed in the middle of a field that seemed to stretch for miles. He had to admit, he was impressed. “How the hell did you find it?”

“Ve looked.”

“Ah. Right.”

“I feel it.”

Harry looked over to see Violet running her hands through the air, her eyebrows knitted in concentration. “The pocket?”

“Yeah, it feels tingly.” Before anyone could stop her, she had unsheathed her wand and slashed, creating a visible gap in the air. “And there are the pretty lights.”

“You are all sure you wish to go inside? Ve do not know what resides behind it.”

Just like the veil. “We’re sure.”

Krum nodded. “Follow me, then.” Harry could see the fear in his eyes, but it hardened to determination after a moment. Whatever else could be said about Krum and his athletic ability, he was not a fool as many believed, and braver than most would expect.

War seemed to bring the best and worst out of people; Harry could only hope this wouldn't end badly.

"What is this?"

"The –the Potters f –found the location –"

"Which?"

"The ch –children."

"Stop simpering, Wormtail. It doesn't suit you."

"Y –yes, my lord."

"How did they discover the location?"

"I –I d –don't –"

"What did I just say, Wormtail?"

Resisting the squeak that threatened to scratch out of his throat, Peter Pettigrew attempted to collect whatever was left of his dignity, severely wishing he hadn't –

"Returned? Is that what you were going to think, Wormtail? It almost makes me wonder why I even keep you around. Did you tell the Potter brats of the orphanage? Information of which I'm sure you gleaned from scurrying around listening next to doorknobs instead of staying out of the way of your betters."

He squeaked.

"Tell me, Wormtail, did you inform the Potters about the orphanage?"

"No, my lord, of course not!"

Voldemort smiled cruelly. "Then who did?" He scanned the spare room, filled only with Death Eaters who had either proven their loyalty or appeared to be on the brink of betrayal. "Something very important

to me had been placed in that orphanage –something far more valuable than the lives of you or your offspring. If I find that any of you had betrayed me in such a way –I’m afraid the consequences will be most severe.” His eyes flickered to each mask, his eyes briefly glowing as he searched the face behind it, the eyes that told all.

“Bellatrix, Lucius, Wormtail, and Snape –stay.”

Wormtail held back of whimper as the familiar cracks resounded throughout the room, leaving only him, three others, and the Dark Lord. It couldn’t be too terrible, could it? After all, the Dark Lord favored that madwoman above all others, Lucius had lost some standing, but Snape –Snape had killed Dumbledore. Surely they would not be his executioners?

He found himself wishing for his friends, but realized that he’d lost them.

“You four will go to Bulgaria and ensure that not another possession of mine is lost. Lucius, your son shall accompany you as well.”

Malfoy jerked as if to protest, but fell silent, knowing his place. “Yes, my lord.”

“It’s about time the boy showed he was useful for anything other than getting caught.”

“Yes.”

Red eyes narrowed. “There will be no problem?”

“No, my lord.”

“Excellent. I expect you to leave soon.”

As he left the room, Wormtail realized that he had been too elated at his stay in execution to truly digest what he had to do. He stopped dead in his tracks, causing Snape to make some cutting remark as he bumped his greasy nose into him. Bulgaria. Kids. James and Lily.

Sirius. Remus. The Order. And he'd sent them there, alerted the Dark Lord to his lingering thoughts on the country.

Wormtail groaned. Nothing ever went right, did it?
"I guess those are your friends, then."

"Don't be insensitive Ron," Hermione snapped.

Ron had the grace to look ashamed, but he did glance at Hermione in surprise, unused to her speaking up. "Sorry, mate, I didn't mean –"

"It is all right," Krum muttered, but he didn't tear his eyes away from the mangled bodies. "I did not believe that they were alive."

"What could have done that? Lu –Luna, where are you going?"

The blonde seemed to be staring at the middle of the room with more concentration than usual, slowly drifting towards it while keeping her eyes on the ground. Making her way to the center circle, she began muttering to herself as she knelt down and traced her fingers on the symbols.

"Has she gone mad?"

"Ron!"

But Harry knew better. "What is it Luna?"

"I thought it was the symbol of the Nargles, but I don't think so." She stood up and pointed. "Look."

Before their eyes, the symbol morphed into one that Hermione apparently recognized. "Ancient Runes! Of course, it must have been some kind of –somebody help her!"

Harry tore his eyes away from the symbol to Luna, who was staring bemusedly at her slowly sinking feet. If that was what he thought it was – "Luna, don't move! Wingardium Leviosa!"

But the quicksand seemed to be impervious to his magic; he tried different variations of the levitating spells as Hermione attempted to stop it, but nothing seemed to take. Ginny even tried to conjure a rope for Luna to pull, but the sand consumed it before it even reached her. With every moment that passed, Luna's breathing grew more erratic, but she remembered Harry's words and remained perfectly still.

"Magic won't work," Hermione said.

"Yeah, I think we noticed that."

"Can we just pull her out?" Ginny walked towards the quicksand, but Neville placed a hand in front of her.

"Look at the ground."

The quicksand's range began to widen, encompassing more with each second. Violet saw movement in the corner of her eye; she followed Krum to what was left of his friends. At first she merely stood nearby, unsure of what he was going to do, and was surprised when he began searching the bodies.

"What –"

"Help me. They came vell equipped –there must be something."

They frantically searched the bodies, finding nothing until Violet felt a strong surge of magic coming from a small pouch. Willing to risk anything, she hastily opened it –to find nothing. Swearing loudly, Violet threw it against the wall in a fit of frustration, calling Krum's attention to it.

He abandoned his search and examined the pouch. Something lit up in his eyes as he placed the opening near his mouth and said something in Bulgarian.

"Krum?"

Victory danced in his eyes as he reached into the small pouch and pulled out a long, coiling rope that felt perfectly ordinary, perfectly –

“Non-magical.”

They ran back where the others stood, desperately trying to free Luna –the sand was now past her torso, her arms freed only by keeping it above her head. In a few swift movements, Violet had conjured a strong bar, weakened the ground, and sank it into it, wrapping one end of the rope around it as Krum tossed the other to Luna.

Soon everyone had abandoned their magical efforts and began aiding in pulling the blonde out of the quicksand. Harry’s muscles felt torn at the exertion of heaving a heavy human body out of sand that threatened to swallow them whole. Then he realized –magic didn’t work on the quicksand, but that didn’t mean that it wouldn’t work on them, did it?

“Lacertus!”

They immediately felt their upper body strength increase as their progress grew easier, until Luna had been safely pulled onto solid ground, their foreheads glistening with sweat.

“You okay, Luna?”

She nodded, but her attention was on the spot that had nearly consumed her. The quicksand receded to its original circle as something rose from the spot. They watched uncertainly as an ornate crystal ball revealed itself, resting elegantly on a wooden stool.

“Look,” Ginny said. “The ground’s solid.”

“Are you sur –Neville, get back here!”

He had risen first, taking careful steps as he approached the center of the room. A tentative foot lightly touched the stool, but he let out a breath as nothing happened. “It’s safe –I think.”

Hermione wasn't at all eager to approach. "It's a crystal ball," she said disdainfully.

"And?"

"And –it's ridiculous!" she said, flustered. Harry couldn't help but laugh; apparently she still had a fond spot in her heart for Divination.

"So –is that the Horcrux?" Violet asked.

"I don't know." Neville felt drawn to it, to the curious clouds within the crystal. As he drew closer, the haze seemed to part to reveal lumps of beige. He frowned. Was that roaring he –

Neville yelped in surprise as his body was sucked into the crystal ball, disappearing before his companions' eyes. On pure instinct, Harry made a grab for his flailing ankle, and found himself pulled in as well –

"Harry!" Violet's hand reached for her brother's, and was caught in the crystal ball's power.

As all three disappeared, those remaining tried to touch the crystal ball –only to be repelled by a magical barrier.

"Are you kidding me?" Ron said. "That –that thing sucked them in?"

"Look," Luna said, pointing.

The haze had parted completely, leaving them with a bird's eye view of a labyrinth. It zoomed in to show close ups of Harry, Neville, and Violet, all standing up and disoriented from their fall –and separated.

"Bloody hell."

"We've got him!"

James and Remus turned to their friend, who was staring at his palm in triumph. "The tracking device on Peter –it's got a locked location on

him. He's in the middle of a bloody field, though, so that's a bit strange –"

"Is he moving?" James asked.

He shook his head. "No, for some reason he's staying put." Clenching and unclenching his fist three successive times, the lines on his palm rearranged themselves back to their original positions. "Damn useful, this spell."

"Creepy, more like," Remus muttered, ignoring his friend's reproachful glare. "Should we go now? I've got to let Tonks know –"

"That my cousin's favorite werewolf isn't going to leave her for a nice Bulgarian girl?"

He sighed. "Let Tonks know to contact the Order."

James nodded. "We need to get on this now, or he might Apparate away."

They looked at each other, knowing full well that they were leaving to catch someone who, until recently, had been one of their own, a brother.

When they Apparated on the rocky hill overlooking the field, Sirius immediately used his Omnioculars to scan the area. Upon seeing Peter's chubby form, he passed them to James.

"Looks like Peter's made some new friends."

James's grip on the Omnioculars tightened as he noted Lucius Malfoy, Draco, Bellatrix Lestrange, and –

"Snivellus."

Remus made a disapproving noise in his throat, to which his friend spun around angrily. "What, are you going to start defending him now, Remus? That –"

“Calm down, Prongs.” Sirius placed a steady hand on his shoulder. “Now’s not the time.”

James’s shoulders tensed, but he said nothing, merely passed the Omnioculars to Remus. “What do you think, Padfoot?”

It went against what he wanted, but – “We should wait. We’re outnumbered.”

“I agree,” Remus said. “And our only spy in Voldemort’s ranks is down there; we need there to be chaos so the rest of them don’t realize that we’re not aiming to capture him.” He’d already sent word to Tonks –the rest of the Order should be arriving in the area soon enough.

James wanted blood, he could see that –but Sirius’s restraint seemed to have pacified him for the moment. Remus knew how his old friend must have felt; those people have all done more harm than good, leaving imprints of their betrayals and malice behind. Severus had killed Dumbledore, Bellatrix had nearly destroyed James and Lily, Malfoy was a corrupted figure, and Peter –Peter had as good as killed Lily.

“They’re right there,” he muttered. “Right there. Can’t we just stun them?”

“No, James,” Remus said gently. “It could be a trap.”

“I know.”

“We’re not going to do Harry and Violet much good by charging in recklessly,” Sirius added.

“Fine,” James snapped. “When are the others going to be here?”

“Soon.”

He turned and stared at the four distant figures, four specks out of billions –but four people who have changed the tide, for good or worse. When he’d learned from interrogating Peter that Draco Malfoy

had been responsible for Lily's death, he hadn't believed him at first. But Veritaserum doesn't lie –the younger Malfoy, their spy, had done the deed. Of course, James knew that he hadn't been able to refuse; knowing the Death Eaters and their strange love for orientations, murdering his wife had been child's play, their way of truly testing Malfoy's merit.

Well, it worked, he thought bitterly.

He thought of his refusal to cast Unforgivables, how immoral and evil the words sound on the tongue –Crucio, Imperio, Avada Kedavra...he had never used them. James had always believed that when the Aurors reduced themselves to sinking to the enemy's level, they became them. Perhaps not immediately, but slowly, as righteous conviction consumed them like poison –then, the wizarding world would fear those who had sworn to protect them.

But now, within reach of those who had hurt, murdered and maimed – it was enough to make him wonder.

Was killing really that hard?
“Harry? Neville?”

Violet stood up shakily, her wand ready. She stared at the harsh walls surrounding her, recognizing the symbols that had nearly caused poor Luna to be sucked in by quicksand. Afraid to touch anything that might submit her to the same fate, Violet carefully sidestepped any brick on the ground with an inscribed symbol and avoided the vines that hung from the ceiling as she tread through the labyrinth. Had everyone gone through, or just her, Neville, and Harry? It was far too familiar for her liking –three people running about in a dangerous magical maze? It was like the Triwizard Tournament all over again, though with the original three instead of four.

She briefly considered levitating her feet, just so she wouldn't have to worry about stepping on anything malicious, but thought better of it – she would need her energy.

Something sounded on her right; she jumped, casting a shield over her before addressing the dark. She couldn't see anything; it was just black and endless bricks, closing in on her –no, don't think about that. Given her luck, her thoughts would actually cause the walls to crush her. Now, if only she –

That couldn't be roaring, could it? Violet tensed, but forced herself to stay calm; after all, whatever was coming couldn't be worse than the possessed orphan and the visions just a few days ago. She knew that she had to stay put –exposing her back would do her no good. Still, her first instinct was to bolt when the sound of approaching hooves neared, faster and faster as progress was made, as the prey was in sight.

“Merlin,” she said. “You’ve got to be kidding –”

The monster reared its ugly head, stamping its two cloven feet with childish petulance, snorting with its hideous nose and staring at her with animal eyes. A creature that had believed to be long dead, ended by a man whose tale had been woven and twisted into a story, and eventually, a myth retold over the centuries by Muggles. Wizards knew it wasn't just a story, but no one had ever thought that the Minotaur still lived.

Still, when she got past the bull head and legs, it did look remarkably human for a half-blooded abomination. But before Violet was able to completely shake off the awe in seeing a mythological creature, it had reared its head and began a vicious charge at her shield.

On instinct, Violet dived away and recast her charm. However, her relief soon turned to horror as the Minotaur's horns tore through her shield like it had been nothing but air. As it crashed face first into the wall, sending bricks and dust crashing down on itself, Violet bit back a scream and ran.

Thinking fast, she quickly cast the Disillusionment Charm, praying that its ability to locate her by smell had atrophied.

It hadn't.

She didn't even bother to think about how loud her frantic footsteps were as she raced away in that narrow passage, turning whenever possible. But the Minotaur never lost her, and would have gotten her if she hadn't thrown herself at the wall, its momentum forcing it to keep on running straight.

Violet back tracked and blindly took a random turn, resisting the urge to call out to her brother –what if it had eaten him already? She lifted the Disillusionment Charm –it wouldn't do her much good anyway– and instead cast the Point Me spell. As she ran in the spell's instructed direction, distant roaring alerted her that the Minotaur was once again behind her. How the hell was –

She looked at her wand, at the spell she had just been about to cast. Magic! It tracks magic.

But her moment's carelessness had caused her foot to land in an unlucky spot, caressing the symbol that laid inscribed on a piece of brick; having fallen into its trap, it captured her.

She heard it before she felt it, a slow digesting sound that made her stomach churn. She looked down and saw a speck of black around her foot expand around her; Violet yanked at her foot, dragging her free leg and hands to the ground, pulling –but it was no use. The empty black hole was slowly sucking her in, faster than it had Luna, and the Minotaur had found her.

Though it had reared its head, prepared to charge, something stopped it. Its eyes reflected a brief flash of intelligence as it took in Violet's situation, the expanding black mass that she was struggling with. With an annoyed huff, it stamped off, leaving her alone to her fate.

A sob escaped her as she struggled harder –she tried every spell she could, but knew that it wouldn't work. She reached out to the symbols surrounding her in desperation, but they were cold to her touch, unforgiving and unmerciful. She had lost control of her free leg, the black hole expanding to compensate for its attempt to flee, and it was now well past her torso –Violet felt desperate tears in her eyes as she dared to cry out.

“Harry! Neville! Dad! Mum!”

“Violet.”

Her mother had come, bending down as she tried to take her daughter’s hand, crestfallen when it merely passed through.

“How –”

“I’m dead, remember? Here and there.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I can’t –I don’t know what to do. Tell Harry –”

“Tell him yourself.”

Violet couldn’t feel her lower body anymore, but she felt a strange sort of calm that came from knowledge of the inevitable. “I got my chance,” she said. “And I helped, a bit, but –”

“No, Violet,” Lily said. “You have more to do.”

She was stuck by her mother’s harsh jawline, her steely gaze –but her eyes still contained a warmth that reminded her of where she was, of what she was giving up.

“Do you remember what we’d talked about, when I first appeared here?”

Violet grasped at solid ground, trying to prolong her descent, not looking at the woman who’d given her a life.

“Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“And after everything our family has gone through, everything Harry’s faced, are you just going to give up?”

“I’m weak, I –magic doesn’t work, there’s not a damn thing I can do.”

“You’re not weak,” Lily said gently. “Not after what I’ve seen. I’m proud of you, and so is your father –but you can’t abandon Harry now. Not when he needs you.”

“I’m not abandoning him!” she yelled. “I’m stuck in a –”

“Krum got Luna Lovegood out. Why can’t you?”

“He –we –our friends were there; nobody’s here.”

It was nearly up to her arms now; after those were gone, she was doomed.

“You’re here. Remember that, no matter what you know, what I’ve told you.”

Lily’s eyes glanced up at the ceiling; Violet followed her gaze, and rediscovered the age old vines hanging down. She smiled, hope filling her as she magically untangled a strand and strengthened it, pulling herself up with tremendous effort. Though she managed to free an inch or so, she didn’t have the physical strength necessary to completely pull herself out.

Then, remembering her brother’s earlier quick thinking, she cast “Lacertus” and found herself free. She clung to the vine with elated relief, surprised to find herself sobbing hysterically even after she had sat down a safe distance away from the shrinking hole. She had been this close –and she hated that she had been so willing to lose everything, to forget what it was like with a solid wall behind her, soft earth between her fingers.

Her mother placed her hand a little above her shoulder, knowing that she couldn’t touch her; it didn’t matter though. It was the thought that counted.

When she had quieted, Lily moved to kneel in front of her, the rigidness in her face gone. “Magic isn’t always the solution,” she said, smiling. “Sometimes love is –or vines, if you want to be practical.”

Violet nodded and wiped her cheeks with her sleeve. “You wouldn’t happen to know where Harry is, would you? Or is that cheating?”

Lily merely smiled and pointed.

Merlin, if he hadn’t known better, he would’ve thought he had been a victim of a large Hollywood movie. Harry had already nearly been beheaded, stabbed and gutted by various booby traps and to be honest, he was tired of it. He had to assume that the Horcrux was here somewhere, vast and dangerous as it was, but there laid the problem. Neville was here and so, he assumed, was Violet, but he hadn’t seen or heard from them at all.

He did hear roaring somewhere, but he thought it best not to think on it for now.

Point Me spells hadn’t worked very well –every time he followed its instructions, it always seemed to lead him into a dead end or another trap. Harry found it slightly ironic that Voldemort had hidden his Horcrux in a place that was so completely anti-magic –had he even realized the hypocrisy of using Muggle means to protect his prize? And again, with the orphanage and horror stories –it would almost be comical if he hadn’t nearly been killed so many times.

“Harry!”

“Violet?” He spun around to see flaming red hair walking very cautiously towards him. He stepped forward to greet her, but –

“Stop!”

He paused in taking a step, looking at her strangely. “What is it?”

“Don’t step there.”

Looking down, Harry saw a symbol –“Oh.” He sidestepped it and didn’t protest when his sister embraced her, clearly as happy to see him as he was to see her. “How’d you –”

“I got caught in one,” she said. “Harry, you won’t believe this, there’s a bloody Minotaur –”

They both pointed their wands ahead of them, where they had heard growling. Harry tensed; Violet, however, groaned, and said, “Oh, no, not again –” Without another word, she took off running where Harry had just come from.

“Vi, wait, there’s traps –”

She dodged an incoming arrow with ease, doubling back and grabbing Harry by the shirt as they ran through. He directed her where he’d been already, hoping that the traps hadn’t reset. On the way, she quickly grabbed a knife off the ground and tossed it to Harry, levitating poisonous arrows for herself. “Magic doesn’t affect it,” she explained.

The Minotaur had backed them into a corner, but this time –they were ready. Harry kept the knife in hand just in case their plan failed, but helped Violet hurl various sharp objects at the monster with a levitation spell. It deflected most of their weapons with its burly arms, but Harry had managed to distract it enough for his sister to sneak a poisoned arrow under its notice and pierce its chest.

It didn’t notice the quick working poison until it was too late, until it had pulled the arrow out of its chest with large human hands, until it slowly shrunk, its nostrils sinking in and fur reducing, until it became –

“Neville?”

Their friend laid on the ground, breathing heavily as his fingers examined the raw, purple hole in his chest, the pulsating veins that carried the poison through his body. The Potters, abandoning caution, ran to him, disbelieving what was in front of their eyes. Violet was momentarily frightened when she saw a spark of animalistic hunger in his eyes, but it was gone, leaving a very weary, dying Boy-Who-Lived.

“Oh, Neville,” she said. “How –”

“Dunno,” he muttered, sweating heavily. “Fell, lost my wand –woke up...here. Where –” He coughed violently, sending splatters of blood onto his bare chest.

“Neville, hold on, okay?” Harry said. “We’ll –we’ll fix this –”

“Harry, he’s dying.”

“I know.”

Violet glanced at him anxiously. “Do that healing thing again!”

“What healing thing? I –I don’t know if basic healing spells will work on poison like this; I wouldn’t be surprised if it were magical –”

“You did it before, at Diagon Alley, when you healed Parvati. And that was a seriously dark spell –can’t you do it again?”

Harry closed his eyes. Maybe, if he could tap into whatever had made it work the first time –he can’t lose Neville, not now. Not when they had been the ones to kill him. He tried, he really did, but no matter what string of thoughts he came up with, none of the words worked.

“You’re trying too hard, Harry!” He looked up, believing for a moment that he’d heard his mother’s voice, not Violet’s. “Let your good intentions guide.”

Reverse the poison, undo what was done, save Neville –

He smiled. The warm glow had reappeared, washing Neville’s wound with golden light as it slowly closed up. Neville groaned and forced himself to sit up, his eyes clear and sharp. He looked down at himself and sighed. “Well, at least they let me keep my boxers.”

“Who’s ‘they?’”

Neville shook his head. “I don’t know. Took by bloody wand, though. I just remember getting sucked through the stupid crystal ball, waking up in this dark cave, and then –nothing. I start coming to and notice

this arrow in my chest. And the hooves; yeah, I saw that too. That was a bit scary.”

“Er –how are you feeling now?” Violet asked, feeling guilty.

“Fine, for being transfigured and poisoned. I’ve got a huge headache, though –and I can’t seem to shake this feeling that there’s something up my nose.”

Harry laughed, and was suddenly struck with an idea. “Neville, do you think somebody cast a spell on you?”

He shrugged. “Hard to tell. I was the first to fall in –could be a magical consequence.”

“And this cave? Do you remember anything about it?”

Neville frowned. “It was dark, so it was hard to tell –but, I think maybe...yeah, there was definitely something glowing. I caught sight of it before I blacked out.”

Nodding, Harry stood up and conjured some robes for Neville. “Then we’re going to the cave.”

“Bellatrix, would you stop your pacing?” Lucius snapped.

“But I’m so bored, my dear brother.” Her eyes glinted madly. “As we’re supposed to guard an empty field.”

“And are you questioning the Dark Lord’s orders?” Snape asked softly.

She smiled. “Of course not, Severus. Why would you say that?”

Oh, she had her doubts about the greasy one, Unbreakable Vow or no. He was simply too slimy to be trusted; of course, the same could be said of her brother-in-law, but Bellatrix would never do anything that would cause her baby sister pain –unless the Dark Lord ordered it. After all, Draco had been made stronger, a man, by his initiation into the fold. Once, she had held dear Andromeda in the same regard,

but Azkaban has since robbed her of any happy times she may have shared with the middle sister, any bittersweet regret.

“If we are instructed to stand in this godforsaken field, then we will stand.”

“Why, Severus, you sound a bit bitter to me.”

He smiled tightly. “You wouldn’t be the first.”

“Are you still sulking over how your old friends hate you now?”

Severus scowled, turning towards her faster than she’d expected. But he didn’t scare her. “‘Friends,’ Bellatrix? That mongrel Lupin, idiot Potters, suspicious Moody and the ridiculous ex-heir of the disgusting House of Black? Don’t pretend to defend him, Lestrage, I won’t stand for your Black pride,” he sneered, cutting off Bellatrix’s retort. “Friends? I think not. I should be grateful to rid myself of those children.”

Draco finally looked up from where he was sitting. If he hadn’t known better, he would’ve believed his old Professor. He sighed and pulled out another blade of grass; he didn’t know why the Dark Lord would want him on this “mission” or whatever it was –if there was one thing he agreed with his aunt on, it was that this was boring. It might have been a bit more interesting if they had been talking about something worthwhile, something worth reporting back to the Order on –

He noticed Snape giving him a pointed look from the side, unnerved to discover that his aunt had a rather focused stare on him –

Thinking quickly, Draco forced his thoughts to how much he hated Potter, how he wanted to break his neck...he saw Bellatrix smile in satisfaction, withdrawing her light hold on his mind. Panic seized him; did the Dark Lord know, or was it just suspicion?

He resisted a glance at his old Professor, knowing the danger, but in doing so missed his father’s strange expression as he regarded him.

“Did the Dark Lord say how long we were supposed to stay here?”

“No,” Lucius said, playing with his cane’s ornate handle. “He didn’t.”

“We’ll stay here for days if we have to,” Snape drawled.

Wormtail said nothing, merely staring out at the vast, never ending field, deep in thought.

For the kids’ sakes, he hoped it’d be seconds.

“Here it is.”

They had arrived in the darkest part of the labyrinth, their path lighted only by their wands. Harry had been unnerved to find that they hadn’t run across any traps or magical enchantments, which led him to conclude that all the danger of this section was in there, in that dark, eerie cave.

“Voldemort really has a knack for décor, doesn’t he?”

Harry grinned, glancing at his sister. “I doubt he’d come down here himself, though –probably sent some expendable Death Eaters.”

Neville didn’t say anything, but did eye the cave with apprehension. “Are you sure you want to go in there?”

“I don’t think the transfiguration would activate again, Neville.”

He swallowed with difficulty. “If you say so.”

They entered the cave with caution. Violet recoiled when she accidentally brushed her hand against the wall. “It’s damp,” she said. There was something there, something that caused all three to feel apprehensive and, in Neville’s case, quiver slightly. Still, they did their best to ignore it, and pressed on.

Harry’s leg brushed against something hard; he frowned as he recognized it as the horn of a Minotaur. He picked it up and showed it to Neville. “Fancy a souvenir?”

Neville smiled, appreciating his efforts, but didn't take it. Harry considered tossing it away, but held onto it –it might be useful.

It didn't take long for the narrow passage to expand into a larger room. Harry noticed torches on the sides and lit them with a quick spell, engulfing the area with light. In the process, it revealed walls filled with inscribed symbols as well as life sized drawings; however, they were too distracted to investigate their surroundings further. Neville smiled when he noticed his wand, reaching to pick it up. But what really caught their attention was in the center, a grey object sitting on top of an ornate pedestal.

Violet made a face. "Is that what I think it is?"

"If you mean a pulsating, slimy –"

"I can do without the description, thanks."

Harry grimaced. "I think the real question is whose brain that is."

"Ravenclaw's?" Neville suggested. "Dumbledore had said that he would pick something of hers or Gryffindor's."

"Yeah, but what'd he do? Go back in time and drill into her bloody–"

"Can we stop with the graphic imagery?"

"Still," Harry said frowning. "Why would he leave the Horcux just sitting there, out in the open? I mean, the fake locket had that potion –ouch. Vi, what'd you –oh." He couldn't believe he'd slipped again.

Neville frowned. "How much did you tell him, Violet?"

"Not that much."

"I just knew about there being some kind of potion defense," Harry recovered hastily.

"Right. Well, there were Inferi too, but there doesn't seem to be any water here –"

"We just blasted that other Horcrux, Neville; maybe we can melt the brain or something?"

"It's worth a try." Harry raised his wand. "Tabesco!"

They watched as the brain melted into nothing but a puddle of grey matter. Feeling slightly satisfied with themselves, the three were surprised to find themselves yanked upwards and out of the labyrinth, landing on the ground sprawled on top of each other. Their friends quickly helped them stand; Hermione was talking loudly, but Harry's head hurt too much to really pay attention.

"—decoy. Harry, are you listening?"

"What?"

"We saw the whole thing," she explained. "From inside the crystal ball."

"Yeah," Ron added. "Sucks for Neville."

"Thanks, Ron."

"While they were watching, Luna and I started looking around at all the symbols. It took us a while —it wasn't one of the codes we'd learned in Ancient Runes— but after a while we could translate part of it. Harry, the labyrinth was a decoy, the real Horcrux is here."

"What? Then, what —"

"No one can interfere with the labyrinth; it used to be here, but Voldemort or some wizard long before must have contained it in the crystal ball. It's controlled by the brain of the original Minat —"
Hermione's answer was cut off by a loud rumbling, as the ceiling and walls began shaking tremendously, dust and bricks threatening to rain down upon them.

"We need to get out of here!" Ginny said.

“No, we need to get the Horcrux –”

“Harry, this place is going to collapse in minutes; there’s no time –”

“Hermione,” he said. “Do you know where it is?”

Luna pointed to the only spot that lacked symbols. “We know which symbols to use to –”

“Do it, now.”

Hermione and Luna immediately rushed over to the far wall, watching in awe as the wall disappeared, revealing the hollow passage inside.

Krum shook his head. “You will be crushed –”

“I don’t care,” he snapped. “You can bet that Voldemort put some protections around the Horcrux in case something like this happens. We run now, the Horcrux is lost forever.”

Neville stepped forward. “I’ll go, it’s my responsibility –”

“I know, Neville.” But Harry went running anyway.

Neville started to go after him, but Violet stopped him, shaking her head. “We need to fortify the walls,” she said.

Ginny was the first to respond, pointing her wand at the ceiling. “Munio!”

Some covered various parts of the room while others raced to the short passage they had taken to get there, making sure they did not collapse either. Having the floor shake beneath them didn’t help much in the strong concentration needed for the spell, but they remembered that Harry depended on their strength, and kept their magic intact.

Meanwhile, Harry ran, unconsciously dodging the symbols on the ground, and blindly reached for the object placed in the center of another room. He didn’t have time to think of any protections around

it and was rebounded by a magical shield surrounding it.

He thought quickly; the shaking was getting more pronounced by the minute, and he didn't know how long he could endanger their lives before the walls collapsed. He tried various spells, only to have each rebounded back –then he remembered. The common thread in each trap here had been the how useless magic had been, how ordinary –

His fingers clenched tightly at the Minotaur horn he had brought back with him from the labyrinth. Struck with sudden inspiration, he drove the horn through the shield; he felt the magic recoiling, fighting him back, but he only pushed harder, encouraged by the shield's strain. Finally, it broke; he stumbled and nearly stepped on the Horcrux, which he was surprised to find was a small, ornate jade comb embellished with a raven.

“Ravenclaw.” He considered destroying it now, but judging by the way he couldn't stand still for even a moment, he tucked it into his pocket, grabbed the Minotaur horn, and fled.

“Harry, hurry!” Ginny said as she spotted him. She waited until everyone had cleared the main room before releasing her spell –the ceiling collapsed instantly. Up ahead, Violet made the same slashing motion as before, and they stumbled into the sunshine. However, their elation was short-lived.

“If it isn't the baby Potters and the Long-ass.”

If Bellatrix Lestrange believed them to be weak and unprepared, she was wrong. Their reflexes sharp from narrowly avoiding being crushed, all were able to cast shields or dodge out of the way of incoming spells, responding with curses of their own.

Harry didn't have time to properly count the number of Death Eaters present, but as he fought Bellatrix, he noticed that there weren't as many as he'd originally thought. Someone tackled him to the ground, the whoosh of Lucius Malfoy's purple spell flying just above his head from behind, and he found himself face to face with his old classmate.

"You're welcome, Potter," Draco Malfoy hissed, before his fist met Harry's jaw.

But new voices had joined the chorus of spells, and the Death Eaters soon found themselves surrounded by the Order of the Phoenix. Bellatrix's lips curled, prepared for a challenge as she took on three at once, but Lucius yelled, "We need to leave!"

"I think not," she responded, eyes glinting as she grazed her niece's shoulder. "Call for backup."

"Bellatrix, there's too many!" Lucius grimaced as he was nearly hit with a spell while looking around for his son, who had completely abandoned magic altogether and was now engaging in a prehistoric fist-fight with Harry Potter.

"Tell your father the Dark Lord knows," Draco said as he recoiled back from his opponent's punch.

Harry had been enraged when the Slytherin had first punched him, but soon recognized it as a cover. He didn't know what to make of it, but he played along, too distracted to notice that the Order had come to their aid.

"Knows –what?" He spat out the blood, wondering if the vehemence in Draco's punches were really necessary.

"That there's a spy –maybe he knows it's me."

"What? No, you're not –"

"I don't need your Gryffindor stupidity now, Potter. Just tell them that –" Draco cried out as a stray Cutting Curse clipped his side.

"Just come with us then, you dolt!" Harry said, pushing him out of the way of another spell.

"No," Draco said forcefully. "I can't put my family in danger."

Harry wanted to point out that they were already in danger by supporting Voldemort, but he saw the sincerity in the other boy's eyes, the stubborn determination usually associated with Gryffindor.

"I'll tell my dad," he agreed.

Draco didn't exactly smile –it was more like a bloody grimace, due to his split lip– but it wasn't malicious. It wasn't his way to thank the boy he'd hated for seven years, but when Lucius Malfoy yanked him upright and disappeared with a crack, they had come to a sort of understanding. In a way, he was as trapped to his destiny as Harry was –the Malfoy family is so deeply involved with Voldemort and the Dark Arts that it would be difficult to get away, to escape. He'd always thought Draco was a coward, but here he was, walking back into certain death.

Some things were worth dying for.

"Damn it!"

Harry looked up to see Tonks burning the ground where her aunt had been, her spiked hair red with fury as she ignored the bleeding cuts on her cheek and shoulder.

"Nymphadora," Remus murmured, taking her hand. "Relax. She's gone –"

"And she'll be back," she said bitterly. "That hag went after my mum, Remus –"

"I know, Nymphadora, I know."

"How many times do I have to –" Tonks sighed. "Never mind. Is everyone alright?"

Harry looked around and saw various members of the Order, his friends mixed among them. There weren't any dead bodies as far as he could see, though there were a few "Ennervate" spells going around.

“Harry.”

Flinching instinctively at the rough hand on his shoulder, he spun around to face the strangely blank eyes of James Potter. Unable to contain his guilt under his father’s silence, Harry smiled hesitantly at him, wishing he would say something.

“Hi, Dad,” he offered lamely.

James’s eyes sparked to life again, and he suddenly looked torn between strangling Harry and hugging him. Instead, he opted to squeeze his shoulder and address the people in the field. “Head back to Headquarters!”

Remus and Tonks Apparated out, and Harry saw Sirius disappear with Violet. They waited until everyone had left the field before James looked at him, quirking his lips slightly.

“You are in so much trouble when we get back.”

His fall was a hard one. A fall from grace, some might say. Either way, the manner in which Harry's arse fell to the ground had certainly been graceless. But digging his fingers into Grimmauld Place's intricate carpet gave him the strength to stand up and face his father's expressionless eyes and crossed arms.

A quick survey around the room informed Harry that they were alone, most likely so James could lecture him in private. But as Harry waited for the inevitable yelling and arguments, he found the silence stretching longer than expected. Father and son stared at each other in a standstill; whether or not James was waiting for Harry to speak was unknown, but he couldn't stand the silence anymore.

"Dad –"

Before he knew it, Harry found himself smothered in his father's embrace, stiff with surprise at the unexpected show of affection. His hands recovered themselves before his mind had, returning the hug with equal vigor. When was the last time he'd gotten a hug? He couldn't remember, but for the moment he allowed himself the luxury of silent appreciation, conjuring a false memory of a younger Harry before hugging his father had ceased to be cool.

He recalled the painfully true memory of a real Harry sitting alone in the darkness of his cupboard, hugging his ragged blanket as a substitute for a protection he had never known.

He shook the image out of his head, hardening himself. There were more important things now, issues that would affect the people he loved. Stepping out of the embrace, now slightly embarrassed about the sentiment, he regarded his father.

"Why didn't you tell me Malfoy was an Order spy?"

Surprise registered in James's eyes. "You know?"

"He told me. Said Voldemort knows that there's a spy."

James sighed heavily. "Bloody hell. This is a mess."

“Yeah.”

“It doesn’t help when a handful of stupid, stupid students decide to play the hero and take off without telling anyone!”

“We left a note.”

“A note, Harry? A bloody note in Violet’s handwriting, signing off on your death wishes!”

“It was the right thing to do. We had a responsibility –” Harry flinched as James angrily shoved a lamp off the desk.

“No, Harry. You have no responsibility. If anything, it’s Neville’s calling, his destiny. If the roles had been reversed, then yes, I would have to let you go, reluctantly, but with back up. But you –I can’t believe your stupidity, leading sixth and seventh years into a death trap...”

“I –”

“Stop. There’s no justification for what you did. Do you know what I kept on imagining when I realized what you’d gone to do? I thought about finding your bodies, burying you both next to your mother...my family, gone. The war’s taken enough, Harry.”

Harry looked down at his sneakers. He’d never had to think about his relatives’ concern for him before. There’s never been a need. But even now, there was a need –a need to stop Voldemort from doing to them what he will do to others. There was no choice about that.

“You don’t understand. It –I need it to matter.”

“What?”

“It. Mum’s death, her sacrifice. Her, Dumbledore –everyone.” Your sacrifice.

James's features softened; he looked weary. "I want it to matter too, Harry, but your mum wouldn't want you to die chasing –chasing such evil."

Harry shook his head. "She'd want me coddled? Maybe she does – did– but I think she, and you, of all people would understand what it's like to see evil, and want to prevent it from hurting the people you – you love."

Why did it seem so much harder to say the words?

He took one look at his father's face and wanted to tell him everything. It was a foreign feeling; he'd always kept to himself, but never before has he wanted so badly to release the control suffocating him, to allow himself some kind of comfort in words, in an embrace. In a father's love. He'd never had that, but he looks at Dad now, and knows he can never have it.

Would he believe him, if he told? Would he be on him in a second, hands on his throat or embrace him, realizing that this was the answer to all of his questions?

Harry's eyes wandered around the archaic room, full of dust and memories, and wondered if James would want to know. Would he want to know that he and his wife had died so young, so tragically? Would he be able to cope with the fact that his daughter had never existed, had never been given the chance to breathe her first breath because of the very evil that took away his wife in this reality?

Voldemort must be stopped –that's all Harry needs to know.

Perhaps James saw something in his son's gaze, but understanding dawned on his features. It was gone in a moment, replaced by something that Harry understood to be regret.

"You shouldn't have to deal with this," he said. "You're seventeen, Harry. You should be out chasing girls and making a complete dolt out of yourself like I had."

“But by seventeen, everything had changed, hadn’t it Dad?” he replied softly. “By then, your childhood was gone.”

James nodded. “Innocence was gone.” He sighed, running a hand through his hair in agitation, the ghost of an old habit. “I want to protect you, Harry –you’re my son. Why won’t you let me protect you?”

There was no anger in his voice, no bitterness; only the weariness of a path left un-traveled, regret that he had failed to keep his son’s eyes from looking so old. Harry had seen this before in Mrs. Weasley, her desire to keep all of her children, even those lead astray, safe. He’d just never heard it with such desperation before.

“I wish you could too, but you can’t. Not anymore.”

His father’s shoulders slumped, and his eyes were fatigued. “One generation ago,” he said. “Exactly one generation ago, we were right here, same as you, wanting to save the world. Our world. A lot of us had already lost so much, but I had Sirius, Remus, your mother....even Peter.”

Harry bristled at the traitor’s name, but listened, unsure where this was going.

“You know what we were fighting for?”

Peace.

“You. We fought for ourselves and the generations to come, so you wouldn’t have to.” James laughed. “Bunch of bloody noble kids, we were.”

“We had thirteen years.” Sometimes he almost believes it.

“I know.” James smiled, something shifting in his eyes. “You know, I would kick your arse and ground you till the next millennium, but we’ve got a war to fight.”

As they both exited the room, Harry glanced back by impulsion, realizing that in the end, they would all be dust, eventually. Mom and dad were. Sirius was. Dumbledore is. The only thing he can do about it is prevent it from happening to anyone else.

No matter the cost.

“That’s it? Bit –uh– small, isn’t it?”

“Ronald,” Hermione said testily. “This happens to be a very powerful piece of magic.”

“It’s a bloody hair comb, Hermione.”

Ginny grinned. “Maybe centuries-old hair is a potent potion ingredient.”

“Like that Pukerjuice, Polerjuice...”

“Polyjuice potion, Ron. Even I know that.”

“You’re not helping, Gin.”

“Shush, you two!” Mrs. Weasley scolded, looking at them positively menacingly. “Or back to your rooms, the two of you! Oh, I have half a mind to lock you both with the ghouls for the rest of your lives –”

“Yes, Mum, we know, you’ve already told us this four times, remember?”

“Don’t think I won’t. Recklessly plunging head first into a battle with Death Eaters, of all the stupid–”

“They were just trying to help, Molly,” Remus Lupin said gently, hoping to placate the Weasley matron’s angry ranting.

“By getting themselves killed?” But her voice had softened, and her eyes shined with the hint of tears. “By dying like Bill had?”

The entire room was silent. There was a slight rustle of discomfort, until Ginny slowly got up and closed the gap between herself and her mother. Mrs. Weasley immediately took her in an embrace, allowing her daughter to murmur comforting words of sympathy and regret.

“We’re here, Mum, right here...”

It made Harry’s heart constrict, seeing their interaction.

“What will you do about the Horcrux?”

Harry started in surprise, forgetting that Krum was still there, having needed a bit of healing for his injuries.

“Destroy it, I suppose.”

“So you do not need me any longer? I should get back to my country.”

He shook his head. “No, I think we’ve got it from here. Thanks for all your help though –we’d never been able to find it without you.”

“It is nothing.”

He watched as Krum clasped a hand on Neville’s shoulder before heading over to the Floo, waving goodbye to everyone before disappearing in green flames.

“Good bloke, that one,” Ron said, nodding his head in approval.

With Krum gone, everyone’s attention shifted back towards the small, delicate comb sitting at the center of the table.

“Now that we’ve got it,” Sirius said, moving closer to the Horcrux. “What are we going to do about it?”

“Destroy it, of course.” Tonks shook her head, changing her hair red. “It’s what Dumbledore would want.”

“He’d also been dying because he’d destroyed one.”

Everyone turned to look at the Boy-Who-Lived, who'd been quiet up to this point. Neville fiddled with the sleeve of his robes for a moment, suddenly uncomfortable with the multiple pairs of eyes on him, seeing past him and the truth.

"Did you feel any negative effects when you obtained it?" Remus asked.

"I didn't get it. Harry did."

Surprised, the adult Order members looked at the boy without a lightning bolt scar, who had never quite gotten comfortable with the stares both he and Neville constantly endured.

"Is this true, Harry?"

He couldn't deny it. "Yes. And I brought a souvenir." He held up the Minotaur horn he had dropped in the scuffle with Malfoy; he'd retrieved it before leaving Bulgaria.

"Harry, that was dangerous."

He looked up, surprised that the voice had been Sirius's, and that there was a worry on his face that possessed an eerie sense of déjà vu. Part of him wanted to demand what right Sirius had to warn him of the danger when he had left Grimmauld Place and died so suddenly, so completely. A small, childish piece of him wished for him to justify his own arrogance, his unnecessary sacrifice to fix Harry's mistake.

Then he remembered that it had been his fault.

"It was dangerous," he said slowly. "But necessary. Neville was in no shape after being transfigured and poisoned." It's my responsibility.

"Transfigured?" Kingsley asked, frowning. "You did not mention that."

Neville cringed under the scolding glances of the adults. "I –er." He'd hoped not to relive the experience, which, quite frankly, he didn't remember much about, but the out of body moment when he'd woken

up, when he'd looked down and saw his hooved feet was not one he particularly wished to revisit.

It'd do nothing but prove that, once again, he was utterly and completely useless.

"I'm sure he hadn't gotten to that part, isn't that right, Neville?" Violet interjected quickly. "A lot's been going on, with tending to the battle wounds and everything..."

Several Order members began talking at once, asking him questions, but Remus raised a hand for silence. "What went on in Bulgaria is inconsequential at the moment," he said. "That can be attended to later. What really matters now is destroying the Horcrux as soon as possible. James, did Albus's portrait say anything?"

His friend shook his head. "No, but Neville seems to know."

"Not much, just that Professor Dumbledore's hand was –damaged, I guess, from destroying one. And he was dying from a curse on the ring. But that didn't happen with Riddle's Diary..."

Violet felt several quick glances towards her, flushing slightly. "Well, we were almost burned and/or crushed to death in the orphanage, I'd say that was a nasty side effect."

Neville shrugged. "I really don't know –I'm sorry. Professor Dumbledore never told me how he'd destroyed the ring."

"He's arrogant."

"Harry!"

"Not Dumbledore," he clarified, dismissing this with a wave. "Voldemort. As far as I –er, we– know, the ring didn't have much security –I'm sure the curse was it. The Diary was his earliest, and well, we've seen what it does. I think the orphanage's collapse had more to do with his hatred of the place and making sure whoever did get the Horcrux, on what he thought was an extremely low chance of anybody getting that far, was killed."

“So what are you saying?”

“That he’s theatric. That’s why he chose the labyrinth and the ceiling nearly crushing us all –a lot of it was for show, because he honestly didn’t think anybody could possibly get that far. So I think that if we just, I dunno, obliterated the comb or smashed it, it would just break. Nothing will happen because he would never have thought that anybody would ever retrieve it and make it out alive.”

Remus was nodding in approval at Harry’s conclusion, and a brief glance at his two friends showed that they agreed as well. Most of the senior Order members gathered there seemed to agree, though there were a few wary faces. Molly Weasley’s eyebrows were scrunched in worry, and she unconsciously moved a little in front of Ginny and Ron.

“Not everyone needs to be in here for this,” James said, beckoning to Kingsley to open the kitchen door. “Kids –out. Molly, if you don’t mind –”

“Oh, no, not at all,” she said, lightly shoving Ginny towards the door. “Out with you lot.”

“But Mum!”

“Don’t give me that nonsense. You’ve nearly been killed enough today as it is.”

But Harry’s feet remained firmly planted on the ground, and he stared at the comb with what almost felt like longing. He’d retrieved it, hadn’t he? Nothing bad had happened when he’d plunged the Basilisk tooth into the Diary...

He sighed. He noticed that even Neville had been reluctantly ushered out, but he didn’t have the energy in him to fight his father’s decision. Still, sudden inspiration hit him as he looked down at the scratched, burned Minotaur horn he still held in his hand.

“If spells don’t work, you can use this –magic doesn’t affect it, and it broke the barrier that was protecting the Horcrux.”

James accepted the horn with a smile and a nod, noting how Harry still had not moved an inch towards the door. "It'll be over in a minute, son."

Harry's jaw tightened, but, with all the adults' gazes watching and waiting, he turned with a squeak of his sneakers and followed his friends into the hallway, listening to the chorus of spells that were muffled by the closed kitchen door.

As he moved further out, he caught Mrs. Weasley ushering Ginny into another room. Upon spotting him, the Weasley matron smiled encouragingly at him and waved him in, closing the door behind her.

Grimmauld Place, by definition, never emulated warmth. But Mrs. Weasley had wisely chosen the only redecorated with red and gold, familiar colors that were able to imitate the safety they were supposed to feel inside of Hogwarts' walls. They knew better, but it was a distinct hope that these children, ones who had grown up too fast, needed. After everything, after being turned into a Minotaur, hearing whispers in the dark and nearly losing their lives, red and gold were the best comfort they could get.

Safety was what they were fighting for, after all.

"Mrs. Weasley?"

"What is it, Neville?"

"Does my Gran know I'm back?"

Mrs. Weasley looked flustered. "Of course, why hadn't we thought of that? In the chaos of your return...hold on a moment, dear." She communicated with Augusta Longbottom through the fireplace before stepping out to speak with her husband; neither Xenophilius Lovegood nor the Grangers were Order members and they'd have to confer with the others.

It didn't take long for the door to swing open, revealing Neville's intimidating grandmother, vulture hat and all. She immediately made a beeline for her grandson, snatching him by the ear.

"What were you thinking?"

"Gran, I can explain –"

"You could have gotten killed, you silly boy, killed. How –"

"We had to," Neville said, his voice a little stronger. "It's my responsibility."

To Neville's surprise, his Gran's expression softened. "Being so brave and –you're just like your father. Oh, Neville, your parents would be so proud of you."

Neville smiled, looking pleased, but it was the kind of smile Harry knew very intimately, a sort of empty happiness of never knowing if people's reassurances had any merit.

But Augusta Longbottom smiled, looking less of an overbearing matron and more like a grandmother. "I'm proud of you."

Harry saw Neville smile a bit wider, with genuine joy. Knowing what high expectations Neville's gramma had for him, he had to smile too.

Hermione wouldn't be able to see her parents because they were Muggles –there was too much danger, too much risk, and they can't protect themselves with magic. Harry felt bad for her, recognizing how hard it must be to know that they can't protect their daughter in a world with which they're unfamiliar.

That would change, one day, but he had a feeling it wouldn't be because of the boy embracing his grandmother with all his strength.

"Neville, my boy, I must say –I'm quite impressed by you. The things you've done...even the Muggles have noticed. You've truly earned the public's support and –may I say– your parents would be very proud of you."

Pretty words for the man who had manipulated him into improving his public image.

“How do you know?” he said quietly. “How would you know that they’re proud of me?”

“I worked with them, Neville, I was their boss.”

“So, as their former boss, do you think they’d be proud of you?”

Rufus Scrimgeour blinked, clearly taken aback by the hard determination in the young boy’s eyes. “Excuse me?” He was not to be ordered around by some child.

“Answer the question, Minister.”

“I don’t know, Neville –why don’t you tell me?”

A bit of the confidence in his eyes faltered, but transformed into something akin to anger. “I didn’t know them, but my parents were good people. I don’t think they’d like you telling lies.”

Rufus looked down at the Daily Prophet edition Neville had slammed onto his desk, knocking over an ink bottle. Not to be intimidated by someone not even out of school, he calmly waved his wand to clean the mess and glanced at the front page.

“Ah. ‘The Chosen One: Certified Hero.’ Quite a catchy title.”

“Right,” Neville said tersely. “But none of it’s true. I didn’t do all that stuff; I mean, I helped, but...” It was Harry, all Harry.

Rufus Scrimgeour was a smart man, one who has seen and gone through much during his lifetime. But he’s not the only one who’s suffered, who’s had to look darkness in the eye and felt the helplessness of being unable to save someone –Helena, the Slytherin girl with empty eyes, and the orphan possessed and waiting, long gone and beyond saving. Yes, he’d been the one to destroy the

Horcrux then, but they wouldn't have been able to get out without Harry, wouldn't have succeeded without his friend's tutoring.

Although, Neville thought wryly, becoming a Minotaur and nearly stomping them to death probably cancels everything out.

Life has been strange lately, that's for sure, and it was almost disconcerting to be thrust back into the public world, full of headlines and propaganda mixed in with truth and lies. He had been quietly briefed on recent news, on the old headshot that graced the front covers.

Though we are unable to disclose details of the Chosen One Neville Longbottom's exploits, we can detail the enormous amount of help he's been to the greater community.

Like he said: pretty words.

"I can understand that you're upset, but honestly, Neville, you admitted it yourself that you had helped. I don't know who else was there –perhaps you can enlighten me on that point– but they're not nearly as visible as you."

"I never said I wanted to be visible."

"No, you didn't. And neither did the others with you. Would you wish that upon them? Would you wish them to bear your burden?"

If Rufus Scrimgeour had asked him that four months ago, he would have agreed wholeheartedly. But this wasn't four months ago, and he wasn't the bitter, sullen child who'd reluctantly done the Ministry's bidding or the boy who, with regret and terror, had not watched as a Dementor slowly emptied a girl of her soul.

The Minister seemed to see his answer in his eyes and sat back in his chair with approval. "I see that you finally understand your place in the world, Neville, in the public spectrum. You...you are the symbol of hope for the wizarding world, the savior who will defeat Voldemort for the second and last time –and I have full confidence that you will."

But what about afterwards? Even if he did manage to defeat Voldemort, what would become of him? Would he be celebrated a hero, his life defined by half-truths and false smiles? He'd come to the Ministry for a single purpose, and one only –something he should have done long ago, something a talk with Harry prior to this convinced him that this was the right thing to do.

But Scrimgeour was a hard man to say no to, and his very posture and harsh chin reflected strength. There was no doubt that he intended well, that he very deliberately placed Neville in this situation for the greater good, but the Boy-Who-Lived can't stomach his methods. He never could, actually, but he'd never found the strength in himself to refuse a man who needed him in a way no one else needed him before –in a way that made him the Golden Boy, the confident one.

So perhaps, he thought with shame, he'd almost liked being manipulated. How terrible was that?

"Now that you've resurfaced in the world, I'd like to hold a press conference, let the public see your face again. After that, you'll have the full support of the Ministry's Auror task force to assist you in your ventures; we'll take care of you, Neville."

"I already have people taking care of me, thank you very much," he said coldly. "People who help simply because they want to, not so they can to use me."

Scrimgeour sat up straight, something dangerous flashing in his jaded eyes. "And what exactly is it that you're trying to say, Mr. Longbottom?"

"I think you know."

Scrimgeour leaned forward, one elbow grinding into his desk as he fixated his intense gaze on Neville. "Please, enlighten me."

"I'm not going to be your puppet anymore –no more press conferences, no more hiding, no more lies. Especially not from the government that's supposed to protect us."

“I see.”

Neville hesitated. Wasn't he supposed to be furious?

“You're dismissed.”

He couldn't believe it. When he'd walked into the Ministry of Magic that day, he'd expected to leave a red-faced, cursing Minister.

He'd expected to feel satisfaction that Scrimgeour had finally gotten what he deserved.

But here he was, looking as calm as ever, scarred fingers rough with experience now handling a quill as he resumed whatever he'd been doing before Neville got there. Quite frankly, it pissed him off. For a kid who'd had the spotlight on him all his life, he really had been ignored –no, it had been the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One who'd had millions of wizards love him, but Neville Longbottom...Neville Longbottom was nobody.

Until now.

“No.”

Scrimgeour kept on writing. “Our conversation is over, Mr. Longbottom.”

“No, it's not.”

He looked up. “And why is that?”

“Because you need to listen. You –you don't understand, can't understand what it's like. And yeah, I know you were in charge of the Auror department and everything and you've got all this responsibility to the ‘public.’ But it's not the same. You're not the same. Maybe before, I could work with the old Rufus Scrimgeour –but we're the good guys, and I'm not sure you are anymore. So I'm not saying ‘no’ now and crawling back later, begging for help. I just –I just want you to know that.”

Before he could lose his nerve, Neville turned on his heel and walked as calmly as he could out the door, leaving behind a Minister shocked that he'd allowed himself to be scolded like a schoolboy –by a schoolboy.

“Is there something going on in my building that I don't know about, James?”

James Potter looked at his boss innocently. “Something, Minister? Couldn't be more specific, could you?”

The Minister narrowed his eyes, sighing as it had no effect on his former pupil. It'd never worked on him in Auror Training either; he'd merely laughed it off. “Neville Longbottom suddenly saunters into my office and proclaims that he's breaking ties with the Ministry, and you know nothing of this?”

“No, sir, I can't say I do.”

“This has nothing to do with Neville going off with your son and several other students to search for –well, whatever they were looking for?”

“I suppose it could; you should ask Neville.”

“Damn it, James, I don't have time for your games.”

James's eyes grew a shade colder. “And what do you have time for?”

“I've always liked you, Lily and Sirius; you were some of the most talented recruits we'd had in years. You're good Aurors, but you answer to the Ministry, not to Dumbledore.”

“Dumbledore's dead.”

“Yes. But part of his cause remains alive, no?” He leaned forward, never standing to acknowledge Potter as his equal. “His secret army?”

“Merlin, you’re just as paranoid as Fudge.”

“Don’t tell me it isn’t true. I’d heard rumors, during the First War...but something Lily said to me after Halloween confirmed it. Something tells me that you Potters are right in the middle of it.”

James stood a little straighter at the mention of his wife, his tone biting. “And what if we were? I get my paperwork done on time, after all.”

“If you were, then I’d think you’d be taking precious resources away from the Ministry of Magic,” Scrimgeour snapped. “Because it wasn’t you who got rid of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named last time, was it? It was a little baby.”

“The son of two Order members.”

“Ah, so there is such an Order.”

“Yes.”

“We’re getting somewhere, then. Disband, transfer the fighters to the Aurors; let us fight united.”

“We’re not under the Ministry’s jurisdiction, Rufus.”

“But you are, James, as is Sirius and more, I expect. I always thought Kingsley was a bit too chummy with certain people, people too close to Dumbledore.”

“A good Auror. Good man.”

“Come, James, you’re smart; can’t you see the good in joining the two forces?”

“Right, the politics of it all. I can see the headlines now –getting Dumbledore’s supporters on your side would look real nice, yeah?”

“That’s just a convenient side effect.”

“At least you’re not trying to lie; I’ve got to give you that.”

“James, as your Minister of Magic, I’m ordering you to disband this army of Dumbledore’s.”

“I’m going to have to say no.”

The look on the Minister’s face was positively dangerous. “As an Auror, as a man under employment by the Ministry of Magic –”

“You’ve really changed, Rufus,” James said quietly. “You used to be the type of man I’d like to have in a battle, fighting next to me. But I guess those days are gone, yeah? So no, I’m going to have to refuse your ‘order’ because as of now, I’m no longer under your employment.”

It took all of Scrimgeour’s self restraint to keep from cursing the infuriating, arrogant man in front of him, but he had to remember that he was Minister of Magic now; he couldn’t cause a scene, not unless it benefited him.

James paused at the doorway. “Maybe, if you decide to start fighting instead of placating the public...maybe then we can work together. But until then, we’ll fight Voldemort until we can’t.”

Rufus Scrimgeour watched James Potter’s back walk out the door and disappear around the corner, remembering the scolding his wife had given him and Neville’s fury and resentment.

He wasn’t surprised to see an owl drop off Sirius Black’s resignation an hour later.

Harry had always been used to working alone.

He didn’t think it’d work, this arrangement of back up and an entire freaking Order of experienced wizards working together with a band of teenagers to destroy a threat that has touched both generations. Things have gotten worse; McGonagall had visited a few times and reported Hogwarts as half-empty, either seen as the last safe haven or a plague.

Virtually no Slytherins remained.

However, thieves did, and the Order had been able to trace the real Slytherin locket thanks to Ginny's acute memory. When she'd heard the details of the cave and the locket's description, she'd vaguely recognized it. Neville had handed the locket over to the Aurors, but he contributed a memory to give her a proper visual.

Then Harry remembered about Mundungus Fletcher and his shady dealing with the bartender of the Hog's Head, who'd actually turned out to be safekeeping it for his late brother, Albus Dumbledore.

Sometimes reality really made his head hurt.

He'd had a huge row with his dad about their involvement in finding the rest of the Horcruxes; he'd won, eventually, with the argument that they were old enough, that they'd proven themselves.

Harry Potter was stupid.

They'd known that Voldemort was catching on; he must know that his Horcruxes were being destroyed. But they hadn't expected him to have such a hold over the head goblin, who distrusted wizards of any kind, and laid a trap for them. They and their goblin guide hadn't expected the dragons to turn on them, that Gringotts' owners had found such little hope and faith in the Ministry and the defective, unreliable Boy-Who-Lived.

They hadn't expected to be blocked in or that Hermione would be captured.

Merlin, this was a mess. He'd promised that they wouldn't get hurt; they'd come even with the parents' hesitation about putting their children in danger.

"We've proven ourselves," Harry had said. "You need us."

But not this. Not like this. Once again, he had failed the people he loved.

They needed to get Hermione back.

The Dark Lord knows.

He knows there's a spy, he thought. The Dark Lord could practically smell fear and hesitation, any idiot knew that. He was fairly confident that he himself was not suspected, but he didn't know for sure. He never did.

That sniveling Wormtail had just turned the corner into his path, his head down as she scratched at the right arm that contained a powerfully glamoured Dark Mark. Sneering, he pushed his robes back, allowing them to billow menacingly behind him. He couldn't resist a smirk at the renewed terror in Wormtail's eyes as he scurried away. And his former students thought the effect was accidental.

Snape raised a hooked nose and glanced up at the ceiling, remembering the time when Nagini had crawled above him, baring her fangs when he'd discovered her. He'd been with Draco then, and the increasingly skittish boy had reported seeing her before and after the incident. He'd thought it was paranoia and an inexplicable urge to whine that'd caused the supposed sightings, but now –

Now there was reason to be alarmed.

Laughter. He looked up, hearing it from the direction Wormtail had come from. Perhaps they'd finally addled his brains? No, it sounded too triumphant, too celebratory to waste on such scum, the boy who'd kissed the feet of James Potter and Sirius Black. The memories it brought back made him want to gag.

Swiftly closing the space between himself and the far wall, he followed the incessant noise until he grabbed the shoulder of a lowly Death Eater.

"What's happening?"

The Death Eater turned and revealed a young face, one that Snape vaguely recognized. A Hufflepuff, if he remembered correctly. His

thoughts were half on wondering what a Hufflepuff was doing in the ranks of the Death Eaters when he suddenly remembered this boy.

Eridanus Pratt, son of a noted Death Eater, had been sorted into a house nobody had considered for him. Graduated several years ago, if Snape remembered correctly. It was too bad he hadn't been of Snape's own house –he'd been good with potions.

Pratt recognized him as well, inclining his head. "Professor."

"What's happening, Pratt? What is all this noise?"

"A trap, Professor, for Longbottom and the Order. I'm not sure exactly what happened, but it looks like they captured one."

"Longbottom?"

"No, a girl I don't recognize, but a Muggleborn, apparently."

"Don't you mean 'Mudblood'?" Snape asked shrewdly.

"No. I mean Muggleborn."

A potential ally. Snape stored this information away in the recesses of his mind, nodding his head at Pratt before stepping in front of him and pushing through the throng of dark robes, his eyes widening slightly as he set his eyes on the terrified girl in front of him.

Granger. One of the foolish Gryffindor youth, brainy and book-smart. What was she doing cavorting with Longbottom and his ilk?

A gleam of white blonde hair caught Snape's eye, and he saw Draco Malfoy himself staring at his former classmate, the Mudblood he had taunted each time she'd raised a hand into the air. I never thought Mudbloods had brains, he'd sneered. What is she trying to prove?

The girl looked terrified, her fist tightening around a wand that wasn't there, feeling naked and exposed without any barrier, anything separating between her and the towering cloaked fingers above her. Snape watched as her eyes met Draco's, desperately pleading.

Draco blinked. The boy didn't have it in him, that Snape knew; even Lily Potter's murder hadn't changed that. He grew up too spoiled, too soft and pampered to truly be capable of everything he was supposed to do. What he was meant to do.

But he was no Gryffindor, and neither was Snape. It was unfortunate, but their positions as spies –although his status was, unmistakably, unknown to everyone save Draco– bore far more importance than the life of one single girl. They were Slytherins, and they've been taught the art of the self, of putting their lives first before all others.

They'd been taught to weigh the risks and consequences, and make the decision that best served them and their cause. It was unfortunate, but the truth is that helping Granger would put them at risk, and Snape wasn't sure if he could live with himself knowing that he'd placed the Dark Lord's downfall solely on Longbottom's lack of smarts.

The Order needed the information Draco passed, and questions about Snape would undoubtedly lead to questions about his pupil, more so than ever. No, there was too much risk.

"Snape," a Death Eater said gleefully, attracting Granger's attention to her former Potions professor. "Want to join?" A spark of red flashed out of his wand, barely missing the trembling Granger by inches. They were teasing her, toying with her before the inevitable interrogation.

Snape sneered. "I wouldn't lower myself to touching a Mudblood – and neither should you." He turned and allowed his robes to billow behind him.

They were Slytherins, selfish, self-serving and proud of it. But the memory of another Mudblood was brought to mind, a woman with piercing green eyes he had known since before their Hogwarts years, since before betrayal and darkness had consumed the lives of the youth and created the struggle today. Before she, too, perished.

He was Slytherin, and that was his protection from whatever responsibility he should bear.

There hasn't been this much excitement in a long while, not since the Dark Lord had last allowed her a plaything. And a delicate one at that, though Bellatrix had pouted when she'd discovered the others had already had their turn.

Yes, this one was trembling so. Bellatrix cocked her head to the side, observing her prey with glittering eyes. It wasn't Longbottom, it wasn't the plaything she so desired. This wasn't the one who'd unfairly stabbed her foot with glass, but this would do for now. After all, the last time she'd been able to play had ended in a hasty retreat with empty hands.

She huffed, pacing around the shaking thing as she thought of how displeased her master had been with all of them. But Lucius, Lucius her dear brother-in-law, had all but blamed the mess on her, on her reckless abandon and thirst.

"You should have gone for the boy," he'd said. "Instead of puttering about with your half-blood cousin while we fought real wizards."

She'd show him, she'd show him! No one stabs Bellatrix Lestrange without facing the consequences.

Her muscles have been terribly cramped lately with all the dueling –it was time for some fun.

"Itsy bitsy Mudblood, hopping through the forest...look out for the big bad wolf!"

For a moment her prey, dressed in Gryffindor's red emblem, almost laughed.

Hermione didn't know where Bellatrix could have heard the Muggle nursery rhymes, but she couldn't help but laugh at the butchering of lyrics, at the absolute ridiculousness of the childish spark in her captor's eyes.

Azkaban had reduced Bellatrix to adolescence, into a child who is inno –no, not innocently– evil. There's nothing else there in that shell.

And she found it incredibly funny as she visualized Bellatrix sucking daintily on a pacifier. Her lungs heaved as the laughter escaped from her, and the sharp backhand she received only made her giggle more.

Bellatrix seized her chin, forcing her to meet her eyes. "Shame," she whispered, suddenly scarier. "I hate broken toys."

With that, she shoved her chin away, discarded. Her wand twirled between gaunt fingers as she hummed an obscure tune, pacing, deciding.

Hermione saw the opportunity, saw it, but something was wrong with her muscles, with her will. Bellatrix was stretching the tension, toying with her. But it was hard to care with an annoying buzzing in her ears.

"The Cruciatus is no fun, not with a broomstick without a broom." A dreamy smile split across her features, instilling in Hermione a sense of dread. "This requires creativity."

"Don't escape."

Hermione didn't move, even when Bellatrix had shut the door behind her. Should she try, should she dare to hope? Muggle villains were always making stupid mistakes, like not bothering to cast a locking spell...

She lunged forward until her elbows hit the harsh concrete. It was exhausting and painful, but she ignored the aching, immobile sensation in her legs and crawled forward, hoping, hoping –

Fingers trembled as they grasped the doorknob, turning tantalizingly slowly until its movement stopped, stuck.

Locked.

After everything, after having literally been taken from the dusty tomes of the library to the dungeon of You-Know-Who, after discovering that maybe, just maybe, she deserved her Gryffindor red and gold, it ended here.

And it wouldn't be pretty.

There haven't been many times when Hermione felt any kind of extreme emotion. The closest she'd gotten to an all consuming feeling was when her uncle died, but that doesn't even compare to the despair she felt in that moment. The hopelessness.

"No!" The walls vibrated with her anger and frustration. She chuckled darkly. They'd thought they had hit rock bottom when the dragon guardians had turned on them and their Gringotts guide.

She thought she'd never feel as terrified as she had when she had been separated from the Order by a wall of rocks and granite, nearly crushed as she desperately clawed at the grey stones separating her from freedom.

Separating the Order's side and that of the Death Eaters.

Her hand slid down the smooth surface of the door, cool to the touch, before she moved back. She'd like to postpone the inevitable for as long as possible, even if it meant a few precious seconds.

The door squealed loudly as its rusted hinges were forced to crank and turn and oh Merlin she shouldn't be imagining what kind of instrument that crazy bat would bring back.

But her gaze met two terrified, watering eyes. She didn't recognize him and she giggled –he looked quite wimpy for a Death Eater.

He put a finger to his lips –he only had nine. She understood that, didn't she? She wasn't that socially stunted, though some did believe her to be.

The stranger looked slightly panicked when she didn't move, when she merely stared at him carelessly.

"Come. Please," he added with a squeak.

"I can't move my legs." Her own voice sounded so far away.

This man, her savior or her guard, leading her to freedom or execution, hesitated. After mumbling some words, he squeezed his eyes shut as he pointed his wand at her. She instantly felt lighter, though not brighter. Briefly, she considered overpowering him, but it was obvious when she shakily stood up that she was in no position to fight. Whatever spell he had cast, he had not erased the pain.

She should have felt terror as he led her down the gloomy hall, lit by green flames resting upon emerald candles. Instead, she felt nothing. Nothing but the black eye swelling from Lestranger's backhand, nothing but the cold sensation of tender bare feet against unsympathetic marble. Even as they went, the impersonal learner in her brain, the factual student, registered her surroundings but none of the implications.

Occasional columns, reflected green by the light. Roman. Not a necessity in holding up the structure, decoration. No portraits, moving or still. Dark colored walls. Brick? No, not brick. That'd be an odd interior. But it was old. Ancient, even. She saw some peeling wallpaper, but that was far away, past another room. That was likely newer, though not that new. Newer? Was that a word?

Her thoughts broke as she bumped lightly into the man, who had stopped abruptly. He turned around to face her, his eyes darting around wildly.

"They're back," he whispered. "They weren't supposed to –follow me, other way, quickly."

When she didn't move, he grabbed her arm and yanked, leading her as fast as he could on his short legs. And now Hermione heard it – voices, louder and louder, cackling closer and closer until –

"Where's the Mudblood?"

The man led her on a sprint towards a backdoor at the end of the corridor –she felt boxed in, boxed out as the yelling grew louder, as the returned Death Eaters cried out the foreign curse word "Wormtail!" as they raced towards them.

A rush of fresh air, fresh freedom, blew her dirty hair back as she stared down at the crashing sea below, the jagged rocks and tiny specks of –what? Broken bodies?

It was a door that led to nowhere. Nowhere good, anyway.

“Jump!” the man yelled into her ear. “Jump and Apparate!”

But Hogwarts, A History said that there could be no Apparition on school grounds...why would there not be a similar spell in a place where people were pushed to their deaths?

“Long fall,” she said stupidly, feeling her focus wavering as the tumbling sea blurred.

“I’ve removed the Anti-Apparition ward. Do it, now!”

He pushed her, not straight down but at an angle, a gentle arch that allowed her to look up and see a flash of purple that had barely missed her –even hear the voices despite the wind cushioning her like a pillow, like the lift before the fall.

She heard the threats and anger, recognized the quiver in the man’s voice as the terror of someone who didn’t want to die.

“Please don’t.”

“Too late, Wormtail. Bye!”

A flash of green later, another sky diver joined her, and she shut her eyes tight, thinking of warmth as she tumbled into oblivion. She thought of hot chocolate, warm quilts, dusty books and soft murmurs of comfort before there had ever really been a need. Before war, before innocence lost, before plummeting to death.

Only one body hit the rocks.

They had been fully mobilized when they heard the news. Harry could remember exactly where he was –sitting at Grimmauld Place’s kitchen table, silent as the others stirring their spoons absently. He’d

been trying not to think about it while brainstorming different places where she could be. This was his fault; he'd gotten her into this, even when she wasn't the same person he knew. Hermione was strong, but had she already realized it?

To be honest, he hadn't felt anything when he'd heard. There had been a certain numbness that came with the news, a disconnect between the brain hearing the good and the heart in denial, in preparation for enduring any more loss.

But the moment Hermione arrived from her parents' house, he did what he almost never did –run towards her and tightly embrace his friend, the one who had been trapped behind the wall of rocks. Merlin, if she or Ron or –this is why he hadn't wanted them to come with him.

Mrs. Weasley fussed over her, clucking comfortably as she sat Hermione down and poured her some warm tea.

"Must have given your parents a scare, Apparating in like that."

Kingsley nodded. "They almost wouldn't let me take her, but I explained that a Muggle hospital would not be able to fix damage magic had done." He looked over at her sadly. "Take good care of her, Molly. Hermione? We may need you to describe where you were –but we won't until you're ready."

Slowly, Hermione nodded.

But the deliberate movements and quiet tremble weren't what scared Harry. Her eyes –it was the emptiness, the struggle of suddenly growing old very fast. Too fast.

How could he have let this happen to her, the friend who'd always come up with a way to get them out of tight situations? Who had the presence of mind as a First Year to remember some vague detail from Herbology that had saved them from being strangled? Who had figured out the identity of the monster from the Chamber? Who had taken him through time? Who had never given up on him, despite everything?

Her. Ron too had stayed with him, and so had Neville, Luna and Ginny. Violet, even, if only recently. But he had let this happen to a person he'd sworn to protect. Despite his efforts, he just keeps on losing more.

He couldn't believe that he'd tried to dismiss her for the sake of his own sanity. But even he had to admit that it wasn't just for him, just to push away the vivid nightmares of what was happening to her, what could be happening. Ron, Luna, Ginny, Violet...even Neville were looking up to him, looking to him for a reassurance that everything was going to be okay. That the realities of the war would not touch them here, in this way. They'd escaped falling buildings and fire, labyrinths and dragons, but this –the idea of one of their own captured, tortured, maybe even killed –it was unfathomable. He carried the weight of being the one who had to put on a brave face, to protect them from the uncomfortable churning in their stomachs, from the empty seat at the hard worn table.

Guilt crept through him as he thought of how he'd compartmentalized her capture, tried to justify and weigh loss and gain in an attempt to prevent another heartbreak. Another killed because of him. They'd gotten the Horcrux, and destroyed it, but at what cost? What had that stupid object almost cost them?

His fault. His responsibility.

His burden.

Nobody was really sure what to do; Mrs. Weasley busied herself by fixing up some soup, but the rest merely stood immobile. Harry took a step back, guilt in his gut as he thought of how they would treat her differently. Fragilely.

Ron will say something, Harry thought. Anything, even if it's inappropriate.

But he didn't.

Instead, Luna Lovegood crossed the distance between Hermione and them, her eyes wide and sincere.

"I'm really glad you escaped, Hermione."

Hermione smiled shakily –but smiled nonetheless.

"Thanks, Luna." Turning abruptly, she looked at Harry as if she'd just seen him. "Harry, wasn't it one of your –your dad's old mates who betrayed you?"

"Yeah. Peter Pettigrew."

She hesitated. "Wormtail?"

"You saw him?"

"He helped me escape."

"Uncl –he what?" Violet stuttered.

Hermione glanced over at Harry, expecting an explosion, expecting to see the hating fire burning in his eyes devour him. But it didn't; instead, his shoulders slumped very slightly, almost carelessly, as he met her gaze.

"So he's still there, then? Kissing the hem of Voldemort's robes?"

She didn't know someone could put that much self-hatred into two questions.

"No," she said softly, thinking of whistling wind and the smell of the sea. "No, they killed him after. Killing curse."

To her surprise, the news made him scowl, made him quite possibly angrier than he'd been to hear of Wormtail's continued servitude to You-Know-Who.

"Martyr my mother and then martyr himself," he mumbled. Judging from the stoic faces of the others and Violet's inner ambivalence, no one else but Hermione had heard. She could understand, but

Pettigrew also saved her at the cost of his own life. It didn't balance the loss out –it never could– but perhaps, maybe –

“Harry, I'm not dead,” Hermione said. “I'm right here.”

He ignored her words, said he'd check on her later, stuck his hands deep into his pockets and walked away: a lone, hunched figure lit by the wavering candlelight.

“Bella.”

A robed figure stepped forward, not a trace of tremble in her step. “Yes, My Lord?”

“You have displeased me.”

“I'm very sorry, Master.”

Red eyes opened wide in a way that should have coaxed a blood curdling scream from her. But Bellatrix was used to this face by now; besides, she was the Dark Lord's favorite, his precious. Surely he would not –

“Arghhh!”

Yet she laid writhing on the ground, secretly pleased with the pain as the others looked, hardly even daring to breathe.

But they were still here.

“From Pettigrew we could have retrieved the real spy.”

“But My Lord,” Bellatrix gasped. “He is –”

After she had collapsed to the ground after another round of spasms and agony, Voldemort turned to the Death Eater standing near his right. “Severus?”

“Pettigrew was a bumbling fool,” Snape said silkily. “Not unlike his teenage self. He is incapable of foiling so many of your plans. After all,

Longbottom, the Order and their ilk have proven themselves incapable of discovering veiled secrets that even the most loyal of your humble followers do not know much about.”

“They are not completely incompetent,” Voldemort allowed. “But to have found so many, to have escaped your flimsy traps –captured one and let her go. I ought to kill all of you.”

Bellatrix giggled, hearing sudden exhaling of breath around her, the spike of fear in the air delightful to almost euphoric proportions.

“I’ve given you ample time, Severus. Who is it?”

Beady black eyes met red, snake-like slits evenly, revealing nothing but calculated loyalty and fearful respect.

“I have suspicions, My Lord. Nothing more.”

“Nothing? But what about your prodigy?”

All turned as the ancient doors creaked open, its ominous sound echoing throughout the chamber as a struggling Draco Malfoy was dragged in, bound by invisible chains. But they could not stop his grey eyes from widening in terror as he realized what was coming.

He was thrown down in the center of the room, right in the middle of the circular new moon etching in the marble ground. Even he recognized the symbolism, the alter upon which he was to be sacrificed. For a moment –just a moment, mind you– he thought about what it’d have been like not to have been born into this destiny, this legacy of being a Death Eater. Maybe he’d be back at Hogwarts taking the incredibly boring Astronomy final, sitting in front of the warm fireplace in the Slytherin common room –because, of course, he’d be a Slytherin, naturally– or scowling in disgust as Goyle gorged himself on a delicious chicken leg before eagerly joining him as the laughter of the Great Hall vibrated throughout the room, became the room, similar to –

Similarly to the way the silence now stretched. Blood pounded in his ears, though, and it could just be lousy acoustics. He hoped.

Draco could feel the penetration of his mind; but, despite his best efforts, the Dark Lord was an older, stronger, more experienced wizard. Yet he only felt a few light, shallow brushes into his terror. His memories remained untouched.

I'm not a threat, he realized. I'm just a kid, a –

"Yes, Draco," Voldemort said softly. "You are no threat. But you are a risk, and a liability."

No! he raged and cried in his thoughts, not caring if Voldemort and Snape could hear, but remembering enough of that instinctive aristocratic manner to not express it, to die with a little dignity.

But he didn't want to die; he was too young and good looking! If he died...he had not yet fulfilled his servitude, what if his mother or father was next? He'd promised to himself that he'd get them out, to safety. The selfish, cowardly Slytherin of him scolded him. It told him that he should have left when he'd been given the chance, instead of reluctantly doing the noble thing, the stupid thing. All for immunity for his family.

But blood is also important to a Slytherin, and that's what he was protecting. Is protecting, at least until the Dark Lord or some other lackey points his ugly, gnarled wand at him and –

"Draco is not the spy. I am."

Not even the most reserved Death Eater could contain his exclamation of surprise. Bellatrix clapped in delight, but only Snape's face remained expressionless.

"Father?"

Lucius Malfoy ignored his son, gripping the ornate handle of his cane for strength. "I am the spy."

"I knew it!" Bellatrix shrieked. "So many failures, too many times the little brats got away –"

“Silence, Bella.” Voldemort turned his gaze to Lucius, smirking slightly. “Now why would a spy reveal himself? It goes against the laws of the craft, does it not?”

Silence. All were too terrified, too shocked to speak.

“Nott? Would you care to answer?”

Nott jerked, a slight twitch noticeable underneath his hood. “M – Master?”

“Answer.”

“It’s –it’s his son, My Lord.”

“Precisely.” Voldemort gazed upon the defiant Lucius with disgust. “Precisely.”

But then he smiled, his thin, white lips curving upward in a way meant to be kind but only enhanced his menace. “Perhaps you will be more reasonable. Give up this traitor of the pureblood cause and be spared of your momentary lapse of judgment.”

“Draco has nothing to do with this –he had no knowledge of –”

It happened. There was no dramatic speech beforehand, no condemnation of one of the Dark Lord’s longest followers, no warning. With a single look, with a single subtle signal, it just happened. It took no more than a few seconds, but within that span of time Fenrir Greyback had launched himself from the ranks and torn out Malfoy’s throat.

Greyback’s white human teeth were stained with blood. As Death Eaters, they’d seen and done many things, but this? The savage execution of one of their own, one of the inner circle, by a means usually reserved for those fighting for the Order?

Because even now, no one believed Lucius Malfoy had lifted a single finger to help the Order. He hated them and their ilk with all his being,

especially the small, chubby, insignificant boy who carried the power he so longed for and cherished. He hated the Potters, this so-called paragon of good that surrounded them and made them perfect to so many eyes. But they were dirty blood, that he knew. Corrupted in every way.

Lucius had bought his power, and the Potters had manipulated their way up by being an example of the mudding of blood, through their position as a glance into a future where blood and prestige didn't matter anymore. A ruined existence.

He hated them, but blood is the most important thing to protect.

His blood dribbled messily down Greyback's chin, dripping crudely on the white marble.

"Draco," Voldemort said softly. "Clean up this mess."

But he was still kneeling on the floor where he'd fallen in shock, his face ashen and knees bruised as he slowly shook his head over and over as he ignored his Dark Lord's words.

"Clean it up or dear Narcissa will share the same fate."

Then he swept out of the room, his followers trailing silently, reverently, behind him. Snape could only afford to spare Malfoy a pitying glance, but his aunt knelt down in the pool of blood with him. He was stiff, frozen; he didn't pull away when Bellatrix wrapped an arm around him, staring at his father's body.

"Poor, poor Cissy," she said. "Her heart will break."

Then she stood up, ignoring the crimson dripping from the hem of her robes. "Best you listen, little dragon, lest you fall crashing down from the sky."

Draco didn't say anything as she cackled at her own wit and left, seeming to fade away into the smog that appeared to surround anything farther than two feet from his father's dead, dead body. Was it possible to be deader? More dead than dead?

Blood slipped into the cracks, but a simple spell would fix that problem. So why wasn't he reaching for his wand?

He hated magic then. No, no, he'd never sink so low as to wish to live the life of a Muggle –or worse, a Mudblood– but he hated magic. What it could and couldn't do. What it gave and took. Magic that had turned a man into a monster had caused those tooth marks in Lucius Malfoy's neck, and magic is what would never bring him back. Death is irreversible.

So is destiny. But at least then you could choose to die or not.

Hadn't Draco chosen this?

"There's one more."

"But do we know that for sure?" Sirius argued. "For all we know, he didn't have time to make seven Horcruxes."

"Neville says seven," James shot back. "I trust him."

Kingsley shook his head. "Sirius has a point. The fact that he has seven is pure speculation. We don't know."

"So we should just stop? Attack Voldemort without even knowing if, on the chance that Neville succeeds, he may not stay dead?"

Mrs. Weasley frowned. "I don't like the idea of children fighting our battles, our war. He's only a boy!"

McGonagall shook her head sadly and Mr. Weasley placed a hand on her shoulder, gazing solemnly at the senior Order members gathered around the kitchen table, hardly touching their cold tea. "They've already been dragged into this, Molly. The prophecy –"

"The prophecy would condemn a boy not even out of school to either commit the greatest crime or be a victim of it. The prophecy is –"

"Bullshit," James agreed. "We know."

Remus stirred his tea thoughtfully. "What if –no. That shouldn't work."

"Speak up, Moony."

"It's my understanding that a Horcrux is created through the vilest of actions –murder– correct? Before his death, Albus passed on his suspicions that Voldemort had intended to murder Neville and make him the kill that would have created a seventh and final Horcrux. Now, I don't know the exact –"

"Says the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor," Tonks muttered.

"I don't know how exactly this works, but in my research indicated that it involves a ritual. Obviously Neville is still alive and well today, but we still don't know exactly what happened."

"Love," Mrs. Weasley said quietly. "The love of a mother."

"Yes, but what if the ritual was not interrupted? What if Neville had died?"

Sirius grimaced. "Sorry to be the one to point out the flaw in your logic, Moony, but you said it yourself –Neville's not dead."

"Death is irrelevant," Kingsley boomed. "After all, look at Voldemort himself."

"But the spell worked."

Everyone turned to look at James. "Neville saw the green light –we know from his Pensive memory. We know the spell was cast and that after that happens death is inevitable. But he survived. Dumbledore's said that it was because of Alice's love –maybe he had died but that protection had saved him from dying permanently."

The room was silent as they mulled over the ramifications of this statement. All except for Tonks, whose elbow fell heavily on the table top and clattered her metal spoon and porcelain tea cup.

“So,” Professor McGonagall said slowly. “You are suggesting –”

“Yes,” Remus said gravely. “Neville is the final Horcrux.”

There was a thump at the door; Sirius quickly removed the Impenetrable Charm and allowed them to hear muffled sounds of panic and scuffling.

“Boys!”

Silence. Mrs. Weasley placed her hands on her hips, face red, and seemed about to say something –instead, she turned to Professor McGonagall. “If you wouldn’t mind, Minerva.”

McGonagall’s stern face began to melt into a cat’s as she nodded, shrinking rapidly until all the Order members could see of her was a tail disappearing around the corner. Sure enough, there were gasps and screams and yowling before the thundering of feet grew louder.

The eavesdroppers all sported shallow scratches on their arms, white against the barely penetrated skin. However, a trickle of blood slid down a scratch on Harry’s cheek. His face was red, flushed, but he did not look guilty as he wiped the blood with the back of his hand.

“We should have been in that meeting. At the very least Neville.”

“Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said quietly. “You’re just –”

“A child? Right, because that justifies being yelled at and scratched by a cat for trying to find out information we should have been told.”

“I’m sorry about the scratch, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said curtly. “If Mr. Weasley hadn’t pulled my tail –”

“It was an accident, honest!”

“Oh, Ron.” Mrs. Weasley sighed. “That’s enough excitement for tonight –is that you, Fred?”

A guilty redhead slunk back into sight, suddenly plastering on a wide, shocked smile. "Mum! Imagine seeing you here! And here I was going to give a great hug to Ron and Ginny –who, as you may know, had been missing recently– but I guess you deserve one too –"

"Where's George?"

"Here, Mum." He stepped out from behind his twin's shadow.

"And why are you not at home?"

"That door was Impenetrable," Tonks interrupted. "How'd you listen in?"

"What my little brother asks, he shall receive," Fred said cryptically.

Mrs. Weasley thrust her fist forward, opening her hand to reveal awaiting palms.

The twins glanced at each other, silently debating, before handing over a pair of ears.

Mr. Weasley frowned. "A –an ear fellytone that can bypass Impenetrable Charms? I thought you two were experimenting with Dark Arts protection?"

"We were," George admitted. "Until –"

"Until I had Ron ask them for help." Harry stepped forward. "Because we're going into this thing dark otherwise."

"You're not going into anything," James snapped.

But Neville couldn't take it anymore. "Is it true?" he blurted. "I mean, I know one of us has to die, but that I –that there's a part of him –"

"We don't know anything for sure," Remus said quietly.

Tonks nodded. "There's no need to worry just yet."

“Yes there is.”

James stood. “Harry, we’ve discussed this. You’ve done a lot already, but you, of all people, know the risks.”

“I know.”

“You’re children!” Mrs. Weasley erupted, striding towards her children as if to take them by the ears. “It’s dangerous; it’s the Order’s responsibility –”

“It’s our future!” Ginny shouted, surprising her three brothers. “We know what’ll happen, Mum, we know –”

“Bill knew the risks! Bill knew, and now my eldest boy is dead. Do you wish to join him so soon? Is that what you want?”

“What about someone else’s son? Someone else’s daughter? Would you let them die?”

Mrs. Weasley shook off her husband’s placating hand, her eyes shining with barely suppressed tears. “They know what they’re getting into, they’re of age. We’re your parents –we’re supposed to protect you.”

Ginny shook her head. “You can’t protect us. Not like this.”

There was too much anger, too much despair and resentful knowledge in those words. All knew that these children had escaped collapsing ceilings and burning buildings, labyrinths and darkness. They’d looked evil in the face more times than they should have and hadn’t come out the same.

But they were a sacrifice no one wanted to make.

“Dad,” Violet said quietly, finally speaking. “We’re already involved. You need us.”

James’s gaze drifted from Violet to Harry, who didn’t look triumphant or guilty, but proud. Of what, James could only imagine, but proud

nevertheless. It was only then that he realized that Neville, the most important piece of all, merely stood to the side, subdued. Ripe, he thought in disgust, for our use. What makes us so different than Voldemort then?

“Neville, we’ll explain everything to you. The rest of you –bed. Harry?”

His son followed him silently into another room, waiting patiently as James cast a Silencing Charm on the door.

“So,” Harry said. “Is this when you choke me?”

James flinched. “No, nothing like that. I just don’t know where you got the idea that you’re some kind of general, but you’re not. However, I do know that you’ve seen very clearly that you’re playing with people’s lives here, people you care about.”

“I’m not. They chose to fight.”

“Harry –Violet, Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood are underage! The rest of you are barely seventeen! You’ve done a lot of good for the cause, there’s no doubt about that, but I cannot allow you to lead them to their deaths! Look at what almost happened to Hermione.”

Harry flinched, a touch of vulnerability and guilt softening his eyes. It was a low blow, that James knew, but it was necessary. Can’t he see that –

“Hermione,” he said tightly, “is okay.”

“Some of them will die, Harry. Maybe all.”

“They know. I know.”

“No.” James ran a hand through his hair. “You don’t know. You know why we don’t use Unforgivables? Because their power lies in hate, the very hate that started this whole damn war. They condemn the victim to pain and death, but they also take the spell caster down a road of darkness and self-loathing. They condemn victim and perpetrator both, and that’s what we’d do if we sent you to battle –

Merlin, Harry, we've already gone over this. You and Violet cannot die –you just can't. Don't let your mother's sacrifice be in vain."

"By fighting, it won't be. Besides," Harry said hotly, "we chose. It's my choice, not some prophecy's!"

"Neville has no choice, Harry. You do."

He looked away, eyes burning into the carpet.

"He can't do it. He's come a long way, but he doesn't understand."

James shrugged. "Perhaps, but that's his burden to bear. As it would be mine if I let you go."

"I'd go anyway, you know. I'd find a way."

"Damn it, Harry, whether you want it to be or not, we'd be using you. Choosing based on our knowledge of your strengths and weaknesses. We send people to their deaths more often than you think; we learned to use good people for their talents and potentially doomed them. Is that what you want to do to your friends? To your sister?"

There was something dark in Harry's eyes, not quite resentment but an inner struggle between two forces James couldn't see or understand. It's not wonder he had nearly choked his own son in a rage of passionate despair –he regretted it, of course, but there was never a doubt in his mind that his son had changed.

Perhaps he had failed in his protection of him, perhaps Harry had grown up in that too-fast way, woken up each morning with dark dreams and the gradual realization that life could end, here, now.

He had a strength and vulnerability that hadn't been there before, when Harry had still held on to the sense of invincibility of childhood, of the magic safety of the walls of Hogwarts and home. Too much had happened. Too much.

Would Lily be disappointed in her husband? Would his dead, too long dead wife narrow her beautiful green eyes at him like the old days,

shaking her head slowly as her cheeks flushed with barely suppressed anger? He almost wished she would, if only to see her again. Even if she still hated him –or at least pretended to– and constantly reprimanded him, her newly minted Prefect badge glinting in the sunlight, he'd merely soak in the insults and smile. He saw so much of her in Harry, the same flashing anger, intermixed with a strong sense of responsibility.

But she's dead. She died because of a noble cause, and he'll do everything he can to allow his son the life he deserves, the life both he and Lily had worked hard to give him.

James had known Lily very well, better than she'd known herself sometimes. And despite the changes that had begun with Harry's seventeenth birthday, he knew his son as well. No matter what he did to prevent Harry and his friends from participating in the battle, Harry would find a way to break through and join the Order. James was not the type to admit defeat, but it appeared that he has no choice in the matter. Or maybe he did, and that's why he felt like a storm has passed, though it loomed right around the corner.

Maybe Harry was right –perhaps the only way to protect his son was to fight alongside him.

Maybe then –and here he is sure he's just in denial– he can keep an eye on him, protect him from the stench of death. But Death is everywhere; it seeps into the pores of the skin and arteries of the heart until it becomes so heavy that it is just another weight to carry, another dead soldier sent into the black hole of battle. There's something exhilarating in the rush of barely surviving, of having surpassed all the odds and conquered –but in the end, everyone's just dead.

Neville had survived despite fate, but he'd lost so much more.

“Dad?”

James waited expectantly. But his son looked confused and conflicted, opening his mouth to speak several times before his shoulders finally sagged. There was a weight there, one he had

almost shared with his father, but decided against it. Before, when Harry had just been a teenager, just a kid, James would have sat him down and coaxed it out of him, protected him by helping to carry his weight. But he recognized the contradictory helplessness and hardness in Harry's eyes –he recognized it all too well. This was something he needed to choose to tell.

"I'm sorry about before," Harry said instead. "I didn't mean to be such a brat."

James sighed. Here we go. "No, unfortunately all of you are already a part of this. It was stupid of us not to realize that you wouldn't, couldn't simply return to Hogwarts and resume your studies. We should have told you."

Harry smiled a little, but James couldn't help but remember his son as a child, smiling widely and without reservation. He hated Voldemort so much right then, more so than when Lily had been murdered. Look at what that monster has done to his son. To Violet. To all of them.

"I can't speak for your friends' parents, but –" He closed his eyes. "I've decided that if you're going into battle, it'll be with us. Merlin, you're too stubborn for your own good."

James put a hand on his son's shoulder, squeezing it gently, before heading out the door. "If you can, could you talk to Neville afterwards? This isn't an easy thing to take."

"I will, Dad."

Harry and his father walked in opposite directions, but their minds were both on the same thing. However, when Harry turned the knob and entered Violet's room, he discovered that his sister was not alone.

No, Violet was animatedly conversing with Lily, who nodded gravely at whatever her daughter had just said. Harry cleared his throat and smiled slightly as both jumped at the interruption.

"Having a secret meeting, are we?"

Violet frowned. "Oh, come on, Harry, after all that stuff we heard, I'm not going to fill Mum in on it?"

"Can't you just float around and overhear it?"

Lily shook her head. "It's important that I'm not seen, and –well, James, Sirius and Remus were all there."

Harry nodded, accepting the answer. "So. Is it true?"

"That Neville is the final Horcrux? I believe so."

"You mean that I am."

"No, Harry," Lily said sadly. "Neville is. He has the scar."

"He can't do it," Harry insisted. "He'll die."

"Would you rather it be you?"

"Yes."

Violet looked away, inexplicably tearing up. "Harry, I –" Her brother didn't see the slight jerk of Lily's head as she stopped mid-sentence.

"You what?"

Now the tears were falling freely down her cheeks, and she sniffled pitifully. "I don't want you to die. Not like Mum."

"Vi, I'm not going to die."

"Yes," she said softly. "You are. I know what you're going to do, Harry, but there's so many of them; they wouldn't care if they killed a seventeen-year-old or an Order member. You can't –"

"I've faced Voldemort five times and survived," he said, feigning a light tone. "A couple of bumbling Death Eaters are nothing. Vi...I have to do this. And Dad's letting me come with him."

“You’re not invincible!” Violet shrieked. “You survived Avada Kedavra once, Harry, but this isn’t the same! You don’t have that protection anymore –they’re dead, Harry, they can’t protect you!”

Harry waved a hand in Lily’s direction. “I beg to differ.”

“You were the one who didn’t trust her. You still don’t.”

“I trust you, Violet.” Harry said. “I’ve only known you for a short time, but I trust you. You went into the Chamber instead of Ginny and dealt with that darkness inside of you –it’s not surprising, really, that Voldemort accidentally put a piece of himself in me. Explains the connection, anyway. But I’ve beaten it before, and I can beat it again, just like you did at the orphanage. Trust me, Violet.”

Her eyes were wide and shiny and so terribly, terribly sad. “I trust you,” she whispered.

He hugged his sister briefly and nodded in acknowledgement at Lily. “Take care of her,” he said.

After he had closed the door and his footsteps faded away, Lily turned to her daughter, sadly proud. “You did the right thing, Violet.”

Violet nodded slowly, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. “Letting go is harder than I thought.”

“You’ve done everything you can.” Lily looked out the window at the stars she had studied at Hogwarts, in a time both simple and complex. “Now it’s up to him.”

“So what do you think?”

“I don’t understand why you’re asking me, Harry.”

“I trust your opinion.”

Hermione shook her head and glared at something behind him. “I thought I’d be home now, but I can’t. It’d endanger my parents –at least they’re here, though. That’s nice.”

“Hermione, you’re the brightest witch in our year. Out of all of us, you’d be the most likely to know how to fix this.”

“Because that came in so handy before.”

He flinched.

“I’m sorry, Harry.” She sighed. “I didn’t mean to –to blame you. Honestly, I’m glad I came.” She looked up at him, smiling slightly. “After all, you lot would be completely lost without me, wouldn’t you?”

“Hermione –”

“I’ve never felt this before.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. But it feels a lot like hatred. That woman –Bellatrix Lestranger– she’s insane. They’re all insane. I thought –I thought I was going to die there. And it took the man who betrayed and basically murdered your Mum for me to escape.” She groaned, putting her head in her hands. “It makes no sense, Harry. Nothing does anymore –good guys, bad guys, it’s all blurred. It’s not like in the books.”

“Yeah, well, history textbooks are pretty biased.”

“Whoever wins gets to be the good guys, right?” Hermione said bitterly. “But with leaders like Fudge –I wonder sometimes, Harry. I really wonder.”

“Then help me. Help Neville.”

Hermione shook her head. “If you were asking me about Ancient Runes, then yes, maybe I could, but –”

“But nothing. I need you, Hermione.”

“Don’t you mean Neville?” she snapped. “Don’t you mean the Order and the entire Wizarding World? The world whose very existence relies on the bravery and martyrdom of one very human, very young person? If Neville’s short life is the criteria for everyone else to sleep soundly in their beds, then maybe it shouldn’t be saved.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Hermione, you don’t mean that.”

She laughed bitterly, cruelly, so unlike the girl he knew and the person she’d been before Gringotts, before whatever the Death Eaters had done to her. “Maybe I do, Harry. Maybe I do.”

“It’s not about Fudge, Hermione, or about the Wizarding World. It’s not about fame or glory or any of that. It’s about us, your friends, your parents, your family. The people you love.”

She looked down, not daring to meet his eyes. “What if I can’t anymore? And don’t tell me it’s impossible, I know it isn’t –look at Voldemort, look at the Death Eaters.”

“Voldemort split his soul into seven pieces, Hermione. And Death Eaters are as human as anyone else, if just ickier.”

Hermione scoffed. “You hate them as much as I do.”

Harry thought about that for a moment. “I do. They’re sadistic and crazy and blindly devoted –sometimes I think they’re soulless. But others–” Draco Malfoy’s hard eyes came to mind. “Others are just trapped, I guess. They may be great, greasy gits, but they’re trapped all the same.”

His friend scoffed again. She’d never used to do that so much.

“Since when did you get all wise, Harry?”

“I’m not. Just lucky and stubborn.”

“Hmm.”

Harry shifted his feet, not caring that he was rubbing dirt on a rug that was probably worth more than his house before it crumbled at Christmas.

“Well, the whole point of this is the soul, right?”

Harry looked up. “Yes,” he said hesitantly.

“And when Voldemort died the first time, his soul just activated in another Horcrux. So, if Neville were to kill Voldemort, the piece inside of him would activate and be the primary soul? It’d possess him.”

He hesitated, remembering fifth year, the dark dreams and tortured taunts as Voldemort had attempted to enter his heart and corrupt his soul. But he’d won, hadn’t he?

“Neville can fight it,” he said slowly. “He can expel that soul from him.”

Hermione smirked. “Knew you could figure it out.”

But Neville had never beaten Voldemort that way before. Neville never had dreams of his Grams being tortured in the Department of Mysteries –or perhaps he had, but had done the smart thing and alerted the Aurors. Not like Harry, not like the decision he’d made that had injured so many of his friends and ultimately killed Sirius.

Neville had never had that blood on his hands, and so had never witnessed Dumbledore and Voldemort’s duel, had never had to feel as dirty as he had with the so-called Dark Lord clawing at his very soul, that invasive presence threatening to erupt through his chest.

Perhaps Neville could still do it, could still win, but Harry knew for a fact that he could. He’d done it before; he could feel that love running through his veins despite Voldemort’s immunity to its initial protection.

“Thank you, Hermione. But can you promise me something?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

“Don’t go into this battle. Don’t endanger yourself. You’ve already sacrificed too much.”

She stared at him with unblinking eyes, and at that moment he wished he had her counterpart’s innate understanding of people’s feelings, of little details that usually told her all she needed to know about a person’s state of mind. Because honestly, Harry could not be sure at the moment.

“Battle?” she said distantly. “You don’t even know where and when it’d be.”

“Malfoy just sent us an owl with the location of their Headquarter entrance. Apparently they Apparate or Portkey to the real Headquarters from there.”

“Aren’t there spells against revealing such secrets?”

Harry shrugged. “Don’t ask me how he bypassed it. I think Voldemort might want us to know –or trap us, I’m not sure. We’re preparing for both.”

“I promise I won’t go,” she offered. But while Harry would have immediately trusted the word of the Old Hermione, he couldn’t help but doubt her, and hate himself for making such a distinction.

So he merely nodded, smiling at her as he closed the door behind him. He searched for Luna for a while until he finally found her poking through some Black family artifacts.

“Are you supposed to be looking through those?”

Luna looked up in surprise, her eyes wide and innocent. “Oh, it’s fine, Sirius Black let me. They’re perfectly safe, he said, but I think there might be a Nargle trap in here somewhere. Old families always have those handy, you know.”

“I see. Listen, Luna, can you do me a favor?”

“Sure Harry, anything. Except going to that horrible place where You-Know-Who lives.”

“It’s not that,” he said quickly. “I’ll tell Violet and Ginny this too, since they’re definitely not going to be fighting, but I was wondering if you could keep any eye on Hermione? You know, make sure she doesn’t try to join the Order and fight the Death Eaters.”

Luna cocked her head to the side. “But why not? Oh, wait –I know. Okay. We’ll keep her here, Harry.”

He smiled. “Thanks Luna. Good luck with finding the Nargle trap.”

She waved merrily at him before resuming her search through the dusty artifacts.

Harry found his sister and Ginny, both of whom erupted at him at his assumption that they would not be fighting. He informed Ginny that it was up to her mother and father, who most likely would not want her there, and told Violet flat out that she wasn’t coming.

“But Dad let you!”

“What happened to not wanting me to die?”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Of course I don’t. But you need me there. I need to be there.”

“What, so you can be my human shield?”

The serious look in her eye scared him. “Yes.”

“Vi, no.”

He let his father have the last word, and after speaking with James, he was approached by Sirius and Remus, the former who embraced him tightly and the latter who put a fatherly hand on his shoulder and smiled at him with proud eyes. They didn’t need to exchange their mutual fears for the others’ well being or deal with the knowledge that very soon, they might not have this chance again. Harry stared at

Sirius, who had died because of his foolishness and stupidity, and Remus, who bore his lycanthropy with grace and a kind demeanor.

They deserve to live, he thought desperately, and be happy.

But there was time for a proper goodbye, a proper precaution, so Harry continued his ascent up the stairs, nearly jumping out of his skin when he was interrupted by Ron, who asked him if he was fighting.

“Yeah. Are you?”

The redhead shook his head. “No, Mum’ll never let me. But I want to come –for Bill, for everyone. You taught us some good stuff at school, and this is it, isn’t it? All or nothing.”

“Not if both Neville and Voldemort come out alive.”

“Look, Neville can be an arse, but he needs someone to back him up.”

“He’s got a whole Order,” Harry replied, amused.

“Yes, yes,” Ron said dismissively. “But he needs mates behind him. Hell, even Fred and George agree. And Order or no –”

Harry frowned, not wanting to put Ron in danger, but he was of age, it was his choice to go. Besides, it can never hurt to have Ron around.

“How are you going to get past your Mum and McGonagall?”

Ron grinned. “I have Fred and George as brothers, remember? We’ll figure it out.”

It felt strange; they tried to keep their conversation light, but he couldn’t help but feel like he was saying goodbye, in his own way. Perhaps it’s only appropriate; these weren’t the people Harry had met since rediscovering the Wizarding World that stormy night when Hagrid had knocked down his door, but they were close, and sometimes he almost felt like they were.

Even after all of his time here, he couldn't help but feel like they weren't coming back, that he wasn't coming back. After all, he had a responsibility to fulfill, and people to protect –he couldn't save their innocence, but he could prevent their eyes from growing hard and cynical, never to trust again.

Speaking of –

“Neville! Wait up.”

He jogged the short distance to where his friend had stopped, his shoulders slumped with a weight Harry could understand. A weight he knew all too well.

“So, I haven't seen much of you lately. Sorry I didn't get a chance to talk to you.”

Neville scuffed his shoes on the carpet. “It's okay,” he mumbled. “Just been trying to clear my head.”

“Yeah, I can imagine. Having any luck?”

Neville sighed. “No, not really. It just –it makes me feel dirty. I don't really want to talk about it.”

Harry nodded. He understood that too. “You shouldn't keep it all in – that's when Voldemort will hit you at your weakest.” I should know.

His friend didn't acknowledge his words, merely stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets. “I heard you're coming too.”

“Yeah.”

“I don't want to die, Harry,” he said quietly. “And I hope you don't either.”

Harry watched his counterpart walk away, thinking that it could have been him, that it had been him not so long ago. Thinking that it should be him.

He shook his head. There were more pressing things to do, more things that might keep his mind off of the upcoming bloodshed –or rather, he supposed, the lack of. Avada Kedavra was a clean kill, after all, with no mess and no blood. Only a lifeless body with blank eyes.

“Neville!”

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Neville turned. “What?”

“Are you going to be okay?”

Neville smiled, appreciating Harry’s concern. “I dunno –we’ll figure it out.”

Figure it out. That’s the second time he’s heard that. Harry hoped they could figure it out in time, hoped that his gut instinct and luck are enough to make it out of that battle, enough to save a friend and so many more.

He hoped he could keep that silent promise he’d made to his father, the one in which he had pledged to stay alive.

Harry had never thought of death as a physical being, only a mysterious, terrifying force that’s taken so much from him, from his family, from Hogwarts –from the world.

He was a terrible dancer, all awkward limbs and fumbling feet, but as his trained muscles dodged and sent an array of colorful, deadly spells, he couldn’t help but feel like he was dancing with Death.

Taking a precious moment to laugh at the visual of doing the tango with a shadow, Harry quickly bailed an Order member out of trouble, realizing how quickly the faces were blurring, as the rapid black and white streaks of Apparition ensured each death its anonymity.

Death was almost tangible, almost as real the scent of charred flesh somewhere to his right. He remembered the Department of Mysteries,

how they'd fought –but there were so many here, and too many were falling under the dark sky.

Sneakers squeaking across the slick ground beneath him, Harry cried out as a spell zipped past his knee, tearing a slit in his jeans and leaving a burning cut on his flesh.

He thought he heard someone call his name as he fell to his knees, summoning a shield just in time to hear the zing of a spell fizzle out. The ground was hard and cold; a spot of crimson red, such a bright, bright contrast against the blur of grey darkness, captivated his attention for a moment. His eyes trailed the blood as it slid tantalizingly close to his shield, until –

The force of his broken shield sent him flying backwards, but the hard fall had helped to clear his spinning head, focusing on a gleeful Bellatrix Lestrange and a panting Neville.

“Harry!” Neville said, and he realized it had been his friend who'd called his name earlier. Friend. He didn't know how, but this vastly different Neville had grown to adapt the qualities Harry had always liked in him.

As they both exchanged curses with Bellatrix, the woman who'd both destroyed Neville's family and harmed Harry's, nothing else seemed to matter: not the screams in the air, not the bitter taste of blood in his mouth or the electric charge of magic in the air.

This was a nightmare, that he knew, and Bellatrix was a deranged Grim Reaper, her bleeding lip split in a gleeful smile that only accentuated the insanity in her eyes, insanity that almost seemed far more pronounced here.

Curses Harry had never heard of, spells that he could practically feel the darkness in, zoomed in and out, and the two wizards soon found themselves spending more time deflecting the rapid attacks of Bellatrix and those around them rather than being on the offensive.

“No!”

Neville fell, clutching his chest in pain, and Harry just barely Accio-ed him out of the way of Avada Kedavra.

Despair filled his heart as he heard the shrieks, smelled the blood and magic –smelled the loss. Too many things were going on; there were too many random ricocheting spells to worry about while dueling one of Voldemort's most dangerous Death Eaters.

Neville desperately tried to recover, but he could feel the pain of the other curse Bellatrix had cast on him that Halloween day acting up, coupling with this one.

Perhaps that's what she'd intended, to kill him while on his knees.

Harry was covering him as best he could, but Neville could see that the exertion of watching them both was tiring him.

It can't end like this.

Neville rose to his feet, ignoring his inflaming lungs and collapsing windpipe, using the rest of his energy to cast spells without words, without hesitation –he'd never been able to do it before, but this was different, this was life or death. His life was on the line now, but so was his friend's, and that was unacceptable.

His gasping breaths prevented him from fighting in top form; instead, it sent his head spinning and left a rather blurry Bellatrix Lestrange, who seemed to be constantly splitting into three, until she gradually faded away –

Intent on heaving breaths, Neville didn't hear Bellatrix's scream as she fell lifeless to the ground, her wild hair briefly illuminated by the deadly green spell that had killed her.

He was too busy focusing on surviving, scratching desperately at his throat, to see Draco Malfoy, wand extended towards where his aunt had been, his eyes cold and grey.

What he did feel was a sudden rush of warm, easy breaths as Malfoy –Draco Malfoy of all people– cast a counterspell to release him.

Neville opened his eyes to see two rivals deflecting random curses, for a moment at a standstill.

“How –” he croaked.

“She taught me the spell and counterspell,” Malfoy said curtly as he dove to the side to avoid the purple streak at his feet.

As he deflected another stray spell and cursed an incoming Death Eater, Harry looked at Malfoy with astonishment. “Thank you.” He meant it.

“My debt to you’s paid,” he responded, not quite addressing Harry’s gratitude. “Longbottom, though...he owes me a life debt. Remember that when this is over.”

Before either Gryffindor could answer, Malfoy had disappeared into the throng, leaving Harry to help Neville to his feet as they rejoined the battle.

Back to back they fought, both boys Chosen from birth, both christened the Boy-Who-Lived, the savior –but there can only be one marked, and they both knew that, one more acutely than the other.

So as they lost track of their friends, of the allies and enemies surrounding them, of the bodies they leapt over to save their own, they saw him, the one who’d started it all.

They both knew they had to stop him, to stop the nightmare suffocating the air they breathed, the crunching gravel beneath their feet.

But there can only be one, and while Harry could have easily given the burden to Neville, he knew the responsibility was his and his alone –and for the first time, he actually wanted it.

Voldemort has hurt him, hurt his family and friends too much to be left to his own devices.

“No, Neville.”

Neville Longbottom halted for a moment, ducking an incoming spell as he addressed Harry. “It’s him, Harry –this is my destiny coming to take me. If I don’t come back...well, tell everyone I tried.”

But Harry’s insistent grip on his arm surprised him, so much so that neither noticed how they could no longer hear the cries of the dying or feel the cruel intentions of spells whizzing over their heads.

“Not try, Neville,” he said softly. “Win.”

He blinked.

“You –this isn’t your fight.”

“Bloody hell, Harry, of all the people to –”

“It’s mine.”

“What?”

“It’s my fight, Neville –it always has been.”

He bristled, yanking his arm out of Harry’s grip. “You’re not the only one who’s lost people, Harry.”

“I know. But out of the two of us, I’m the only one who truly understands what he’s lost.”

That condescending son of a – “You are this close to –”

“I –I can’t explain it, Neville; honestly, you wouldn’t believe me if I did. But one of us got the stupid scar, got the responsibility that came with it.”

“Yeah,” he sneered, jabbing a finger at the lightning bolt scar. But as his fingers brushed the ugly mark that had defined him for so long, had burdened him with a responsibility he’d never thought he could handle, Neville couldn’t help but feel that Harry was right.

He didn't want to be a coward, not again, but Harry wasn't giving him a way out, wasn't sending him off on the easy path –nothing was easy, not for them. Not for the two people who truly understood what it meant to be the Boy-Who-Lived; and Neville believes his friend does. He had that look in his eye, that tired, old weariness that Neville couldn't quite explain.

But he also had something Neville didn't have –purpose.

"Please, Neville." Merlin, he was pleading now. Neville knew just as well as Harry that, in a fight, Harry would have won, so why was he pleading?

Because Harry wasn't that person. He would never be the person who took everything he wanted until the only thing he didn't have was the world. Neville had always thought Harry had been Gryffindor's golden boy, the one everyone loved, the one everyone would die for.

Perhaps there's more truth to that than he'd thought.

"Maybe my destiny is...different." It was almost too painful to bear. What had he suffered for? What was left?

"You're a good guy, Neville, meant to do great things. But him? He's mine."

"It's my fault Mrs. Potter died."

Harry looked shocked. "No it wasn't."

"It was. If I hadn't been there –"

"You didn't invite them there. It's not your fault."

Neville stared at him, recognizing his unspoken guilt.

"It wasn't yours either."

Suddenly both boys cried out as a splitting pain assaulted their foreheads, forcing flashes of misery and memory, hate and rage, exploding instruments and abominations until they were left with only one thing.

Hope.

“My –my scar’s gone.”

Harry reached up and ran his fingers along the familiar ridge, the shape that had started it all. It had been there all along, he realized, just hidden. Just waiting for him to wake up.

“What the bloody hell just happened?” Neville looked around wildly, finally absorbing his surroundings. “What? Why is –did you do this, Harry?”

Maybe he had. Maybe it was because of him that time had frozen, leaving spells unspilt from still lips and flashes of color trapped in the air. Maybe he had made these eerie statues of bodies, bent over in ways they shouldn’t, stuck somewhere between life and death.

“Harry...beat him. I don’t know what just happened, why –” He looked down at his wand. “But it feels right. Like everything’s been put back in the right place.”

And it had. Destiny had been reversed, but properly this time, restoring what always should have been, what had always been meant to be. Neville had been brave, had battled his own demons and won, but without Harry pushing him, without Harry leaving that one night to face his own destiny, Neville would never have found his.

Harry nodded gravely, reaching out a hand. “I’ll win.”

They shook hands, these two boys touched by a destiny neither had asked for, lost more than they ever should have at the age of one. But they had gained as much as lost, and it takes more than the Dark Arts to cure what the Dark Arts wrought.

It takes love.

It takes the determination of a single person to realize what he's lost and love his friends and remaining family, love Hogwarts, love the fractured Ministry, love a world full of strangers enough to want to save it. To choose to save it.

It takes a friend's quiet determination and willing sacrifice to prevent a terrible future from coming to pass. It takes four laughing friends, full of memories of a childhood tinted by an unpreventable war, split apart by betrayal but still tied by hope. It takes a well intentioned traitor to realize his mistakes, to look in the mirror and see what he'd become, and truly put himself at risk for the first time and sacrifice himself to save another like he never had before.

It takes a mother's love, a father's sacrifice, a bond that cannot be broken but had only been recently realized. It takes getting to know a sister he'd never had, a sister who's all too aware of her non-existence, more so than he realizes. It takes a sister and ghost of a mother, willing to help as much they can in the limited time they have.

It takes Harry Potter, shoulders squared and wand held tightly in his hand, to walk across a battlefield of soldiers, frozen in time, and face the one who aims to take it all.

You will lose everything.

Not if he can help it.

As he stood in front of the door of the Riddle House, he heard the battle resume behind him, briefly deafened by the sudden return of screams and spells, knowing that Neville, his father, Sirius, Remus and his friends were back there in the fray, giving everything they had, giving their lives for him, for everyone.

How could he give anything less?

His wand hummed with strength at the recognition of its brother, and he opened the door to see –what?

He was waiting for Harry, standing calmly in the middle of the entryway, looking positively serene next to a vase of wilted lilies. Harry blinked, and blinked again, but made the first move, not to be tricked.

But Albus Dumbledore merely watched as the spell went through his chest and hit the wall behind him. He looked at Harry with the same half-moon spectacles, the same crooked nose and sparkling blue eyes he'd had in life, and smiled sadly.

"Not what you were expecting, was it, Harry?"

"What –who –where's Voldemort?"

Dumbledore paused, as if unsure how to explain. "I commandeered him, I suppose."

"Excuse me?"

"Harry?"

He didn't need to turn around to see who it was. Instead, he moved to the side, where he could keep this ghost Dumbledore and his ghost mother in his eyesight.

"What is this?" he demanded, utterly, utterly confused.

Lily looked at him sadly, then turned to face Dumbledore. "You figured it out, then, Albus?"

Dumbledore nodded. "It took a while to find him, but find Ignacius Fatum I did."

They both glanced quickly at Harry as the vase of lilies broke with a burst of red light. He looked angry, confused, betrayed.

"What is this?"

“Harry...” Lily bit her lip, like Dumbledore, unsure how to explain. “Do you remember us talking before you went into the orphanage? About how whether or not you might have gained something from this?”

“You mean from being sent to an alternate universe?”

“Yes.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It has to do with everything, Harry.” Lily closed her eyes tiredly. “Merlin, sometimes I wish I could have just been with you in the beginning, but —”

“Perhaps we should start there,” Dumbledore said gently.

“Hold on,” Harry said. “How do I even know you’re the real thing? How do I know I can trust you?”

Lily looked hurt, but there was also understanding in her eyes. “Because I held you in my arms when you were born, afraid of having a child in a world wrought with violence. Because James and I used to watch you with amazement, wondering how we could have made something so perfect. Because we watched you grow up without us, watched you endure too much, too soon, and could do nothing about it but whisper to you in your dreams. Because I love you.”

Harry felt his hand shaking slightly, but he didn’t know why. Slowly, surely, he lowered his wand. “Why couldn’t you have told me everything, when you appeared?”

“Because by then, we realized that this couldn’t end that way.”

He scowled. “But what does that mean?”

“It means you control this ‘world’ Harry, with your mind,” Dumbledore said. “It means that this —none of this is real.”

“What?” He took a step back, his back pressed against the peeling wallpaper for support. “No —you’re lying. Not after everything —not

after losing you, you tell me that none of this is real? That's –" Merlin, he felt betrayed, his head spun at the implications; he'd lost his mother again, and she couldn't have bothered to tell him that it wasn't really happening?

Hermione had nearly died, had almost been broken, and the emotional turmoil in her eyes, the cynicism, wasn't real? They'd all lost their innocence, hadn't they? How could that not be real when he felt the truth in his gut, the only place where it really mattered?

They had to be lying; if they'd told him that it really was an alternate universe, full of subtleties and history his bloody head could not have held on its own, he'd believe them. But this –not this.

But something in their eyes made him realize that, reluctant though he may be to accept this, it was true. It was all for nothing.

"You manipulated me."

"Yes," Lily said. "It was the hardest thing in the world, not being able to tell you, but –yes, we did."

He wanted to blow something up, but his hands were shaking too violently for him to risk performing any magic. "And Violet? That means –that means she really doesn't exist anywhere. Not even here."

"Technically, that's not true."

Harry looked up, seeing Violet standing next to her mother.

"How'd –"

"You summoned me," she replied, stepping closer to her brother. Her face fell when he stepped away from her. "This place is falling apart, Harry, the rules are breaking down, so when you thought of me, I –er– came, I guess."

“Did you know about this?” he demanded, forgetting that she didn’t exist, that she was only a figment of his imagination. Oh Merlin, she wasn’t real. How could he love something that didn’t exist?

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t –not until she –Mum– told me the night you left Hogwarts. Before that I only had memories of this place, of growing up with Mum and Dad, with you.”

“But those memories aren’t real –you aren’t real.”

“In a way,” she agreed. “It wasn’t easy to accept, but –I did exist, if only as a tiny little embryo, barely a few weeks old.”

“What?”

Violet nodded sympathetically. “Yeah, I was confused too. Mum hadn’t meant to get pregnant, I guess, but there I was. Not quite existing, but not quite...not, either. I don’t think she even knew about me, even after she was dead, right?” she asked, turning to Lily.

Their mother nodded. “I was a little preoccupied at the time.”

Dumbledore stepped forward. “Harry, the human mind only uses about ten percent of its full capacity normally –sometimes we use more, but it doesn’t exceed seventeen percent. There’s enough room for a world this elaborate to be built in the mind –in your mind. Using the connection -and knowledge between yourself and Voldemort and the dead, this intricate world was created. There were things going on here that you were not aware of, but because of the scope of the spell and the sheer enormity of information that the dead have, this was able to be created. But we didn’t do this –Voldemort did.”

Using the connection -and knowledge- between yourself and Voldemort and the dead, this intricate world was created. There were things going on in this world that you were not aware of, but because of the scope of the spell and the sheer enormity of the information the dead have, this was able to be created.

“Voldemort?” This was going to give him a headache, but he listened intently, determined that this was not to be a waste.

“Yes,” Lily said. “He used a spell, one that took advantage of your connection, to kill you. To create a world in which, slowly, your greatest fear would consume you, kill you here and destroy your mind in the real world.

“The only catch is that this is a very ancient, very dark spell, one that, like most of these, required a connection to the dead. And for those of us paying very close attention to the actions of the living, we caught it in time to do something about it.”

“That’s stupid,” Harry said skeptically. “Why the hell would Voldemort risk that?”

“Because he’s afraid, Harry. He’s an arrogant bastard, one that has a penchant for babbling on about his successes, but you scare him. You, you who fought his possession, whose soul had repelled him so utterly and completely –you scared the shit out of him, Harry, and he aimed to break you when you were most vulnerable. He wanted to catch you still grieving for Sirius, still grieving for Dumbledore, and destroy you with failure –we saw what he was doing, and did our best to help you win.”

“Really?” he said sarcastically. “And how was that? By letting yourself die? By letting Padma die and Hermione get tortured? How was that helping?”

“We had very little information about this spell, Harry, and very little time. I knew enough to know that we could insert one of us into the world the spell created, to help you.” Dumbledore peered down at him with the eyes Harry had trusted so much, had instilled such confidence in. “There is much about the world of the dead that we don’t understand, and we weren’t sure how to help, except to be there and tell you the truth right away.”

“But then they realized that you had a sister in this world,” Violet said softly. “They realized that you did have a sister in real life, or you would have if Mum hadn’t died. They decided that you would need moral support until they could discover what they needed to do to get

you out of here, and they chose to give parts of themselves to give the opportunity to me, to let me live in a way I never could.”

“Mum was pregnant, when she died here,” Harry muttered.

“Yeah, the spell’s not exactly the nicest, is it?”

“We searched for people who’d performed the spell in the past, or had studied it,” Dumbledore continued. “We discovered enough that, by the time Lily had died here, we realized that we couldn’t do much more but guide you on the path you needed to choose to walk.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore in exasperation, recognizing that even the way he conducted his pep talks and explanations were the same.

He felt overwhelmed, he felt –Merlin, he didn’t even know.

“As Albus tried to find a way to ‘commandeer’ a person here, I came down here,” Lily said softly. “I wish James could have come down with me –and so does he– but there was only an empty spot for a Lily Potter.”

“Were they real?” Had he said “I love you” to the wrong parents?

“Yes, Harry, they were very real. They were what we would have been, could have been, had things been different.” Had destiny been reversed.

But he realized that even now, when all of this proved to be nothing but an illusion, it was enough. He would have loved to have experienced this family, these people for real, but this was real enough, this was enough to make him see, as he’d told Neville, what he’d truly lost for the first time.

He’d told them “I love you” and had earned their pride –he had been loved.

He looked at Lily Potter and realized that they were one and the same. The Mum who’d died here would have –and had– thrown herself in a pit of snakes for him, but this ghost already had. She’d

never had those seventeen years with him, but had never lost that connection with the living world. She had watched her son grow knowing that her sacrifice had saved him, but had also left him with very little but faded memories of a beautiful smile and green light.

And love. Love that had coursed through his veins and protected him.

“So you figured out how to ‘commandeer’ Voldemort to –what? Why now?”

“I found Mr. Fatum, the originator of the spell a many millennia ago. It took longer than I’d anticipated, and a great deal more persuasion to jolt him out of listlessness; he doesn’t have much of a connection to the living anymore. Although I must say, it was quite an adventure.”

“Death is but the next great adventure,” Harry muttered, remembering the words Dumbledore had spoken to him his first year at Hogwarts. But they had to make a choice, hadn’t they? Dead, they could have chosen to let go of all ties to the living, but they loved him, loved them all enough to keep a close eye on things, to help as much as they could in their limited power. It all came down to choices.

Dumbledore fixed his blue eyes on him with such intensity that he felt uncomfortable. “As for the timing –you won, Harry, you beat this spell on your own, of your own volition, and for that all of us are extremely proud of you.”

“But how?” he said weakly. “All I did was –”

All he did was make the choice to win.

He reached up and touched his scar, the one that had been invisible and hidden all this time. “My greatest fear,” he said, “is losing the people I love. Is that why Mum died, why this battle happened?”

Lily nodded. “If Neville had walked into this room –and he would have, thanks to you, if you hadn’t stopped him– he would have died. Many of your friends, including Hermione, would have died –”

“Hermione?” Harry said sharply. “But she’s –”

"She wanted vengeance, and slipped past the others despite your precautions."

His heart sank. He wouldn't allow this to happen again, he couldn't.

"It would have killed me, for them to die."

"Yes."

Violet had walked over to Harry without him noticing, but he didn't mind as she stood next to him. "But they haven't, not yet," she said softly. "This place was created through a connection between you, Voldemort and the dead –these Horcrux locations, they're all real. Hardly any time has passed in reality –just a night and morning; you can stop this."

"That's why you didn't say anything; because you wanted me to look."

"The only way out of here is for you to overcome your fear, to want to destroy Voldemort not because you're the 'Boy-Who-Lived' or the Chosen One," Dumbledore said, "but because you know what he's taken from you, from so many others, and wish to prevent that loss from happening to anyone else. If we had told you that this wasn't real, that it had never come to pass in the real world or an alternate one –would you have wanted to save it?"

"No," he admitted. "But I would have liked the choice. I would have liked not to have been manipulated by destiny, by fate, by people I trusted."

"But you didn't trust me," Lily reminded him.

"You lied to me."

"I tried not to, but –it's hard to explain, but you needed to come to this realization by yourself and believe it wholeheartedly; I couldn't risk compromising that by telling you everything –what good would it have done anyway?"

He scowled. "Yeah, well, I did it...so why am I still here?"

"Because you aren't finished yet –because you need to kill Voldemort."

"What? But Voldemort's not here, you hijacked –oh."

His heart sank. He had been prepared to kill Voldemort, to kill the man who had ruined his life, ruined so many lives and potential happiness, not his bloody Headmaster, even if he was infuriating him at the moment.

"You can do it, Harry," Violet said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "We believe in you."

"So did the people here, and apparently I was meant to fail them."

"Not yet, Harry –you can choose not to."

He was surprised to find Violet hugging him violently, and when she pulled away he could see the fear in her eyes, the knowledge she must have had to carry ever since that night when Lily had pulled her aside and told her everything.

She had known the terrible, terrible truth, yet she had been determined to help him as best she could. Would he have done the same, having already lead a real life? All she had were false memories, but found that the only purpose, the only effect she could have on reality was by helping her brother. Would he have done the same?

"What will happen to you? I mean –where do unborn babies go when they die?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "There are still many mysteries in death. The only thing we know for sure is that Violet here had never lived – but has, in a way, because of you."

"But –will you just go back to wherever you were after this crumbles?"

Violet shook her head sadly, trying to smile but was not quite successful in eradicating the fear in her eyes. "I don't know, Harry," she said honestly. "But I'm glad to have met you."

He hugged her in a way he knew he would never be able to again. He knew that, even if she was technically already dead, he was losing her. "Me too, Vi...me too."

Looking over at Lily, at her longing, Harry gave in to impulse, pushing away his resentments. This was the only chance he had, and he wasn't going to miss it. Ignoring the worlds' laws, knowing that the rules were breaking, he willed his mother, the one who had given so much for him, to be solid enough for her to feel his embrace.

He didn't see the shock on her face as she put her arms around her grown son, the one she hadn't held since he was one, since she had put him down and faced the green light that had ended her life. He didn't see the joy that his simple touch had brought her, knowing that not everything was lost, not yet.

"I love you, Mum."

"I love you too, Harry, so, so much," she murmured into his hair, the messy mop of black hair that reminded her so much of her husband. How she wished he could have been here too, meeting his son, but they would be reunited again, hopefully much further in the future.

When he released her from his hold, Harry saw Dumbledore smiling at them, his blue eyes sparkling with hope. He squared his shoulders and stared at his wand, the one that he would carry with him into the final battle, into the final determination of the fate of the wizarding world –but more importantly, its millions of occupants.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm still kind of angry that you didn't tell me bloody anything, but...thank you, Professor, for coming back." For caring.

He didn't like it, but he could understand their motivations, that they had been trying to help the best way they could, with as much information as they'd had at the time.

Dumbledore inclined his head. "I think we will all be thanking you very soon, Harry."

He took one last look at his mother and sister, both waiting for the end of the world, for their return to the clouds and sky, where they can't do much but observe. He could see their hope and fear, hope that they had enacted some change and fear that the world will fall.

He wouldn't let that happen.

It takes many men to move a mountain, but it may just take Harry Potter to prevent a single man, just a man, from destroying all that he holds dear.

But he knows that he won't be alone, knows that he will not push Ron and Hermione away like he had in the past. Without his friends, he would have collapsed long ago.

Love goes both ways, and he was determined to never forget that.

He looked at Dumbledore, replacing the image of his serene Headmaster with Voldemort's sneer, his pallid, stretched skin and malicious red eyes. He thought of all he'd taken from him, of Bill, killed in this world, of Padma's broken body and Parvati's blood everywhere. He even thought of Malfoy, his unusually quiet admissions in the interrogation room. He thought of Neville, brave Neville who had been just as insecure here, of Hermione's wide eyes as she realized that someone believed her worthy of friendship, of Luna's eagerness to be accepted, of Ron's protectiveness towards his sister.

He thought of Ginny, who, despite not being the girl in the Chamber of Secrets, was still so strong. He thought of his father's grief, the love that made him dismiss his suspicions about Harry, Sirius's shining, laughing eyes, Remus's smile, no longer old and sad, and Peter Pettigrew's determination to fix his mistake. He thought of his mother and sister, working to help him.

He had once been told that to perform an Unforgivable, he had to truly hate, to want to cause pain.

He did hate Voldemort; he hated him with all his heart, but it was the faces of the people he's loved and lost that made his wand hum with expectation, the love he had for them that would allow the spell to release from his lips and choose to end an era of darkness.

Harry Potter would take pleasure in the prevention of the loss of any more lives.

He raised his wand.

"Avada Kedavra."

Harry woke up.

He was in his own room at Number 4, Privet Drive, surrounded by a preening Hedwig, Hermione's neatly rolled up sleeping bag and Ron's wrinkled one, sunlight streaming through the window and Muggle novels lining the bookcase. He reached for his glasses and found that they were on the other side, the opposite side of the bed at his home with the Potters, with Lily and James and Violet. With his family.

It didn't feel like his room anymore, not this cold, undecorated room that lay above the scent of bacon already sizzled and eaten, above the atmosphere of grumbling resentment. He missed his Quidditch poster, the familiarity and comfort of pillow fights and pranks.

Oh, wait, except all of that was in his head, wasn't it? Sodding spell.

Harry flexed his palm, noting the faint reprimand of "I must not tell lies" etched on his hand once again. He was the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One once more –but hadn't he always been? In spirit, in the vivid world constructed in his mind. But he's had vivid dreams before –he hated the idea, but it made sense, didn't it? He'd never had a sister, never had a real blood family after the age of one. He had Hermione and Ron and the Weasleys and Remus. He'd had Sirius, and it made his chest ache to think he'd never see him laugh again, made his head hurt that he was mourning him all over again.

But what made him hurt the most was thinking how he'd never again taste his mother's pancakes or share a joke with his father. Hell, he'd take the lectures and the "are you on drugs" talk if only he'd see them again. It had never ached this much before. Never.

He used to sit in his cupboard under the stairs and summon nostalgia for parents tragically dead, tragically young. When he was little, he had idolized them and wished for their resuming embrace and a mother's kiss as they took him away from his prison. But as he lay there on the bed of Dudley's second bedroom, he instead longed for their passionate imperfections just as much as the crystal perfect moments. He wanted his father's slightly undercooked pasta, so unlike Aunt Petunia's perfectly shaped specimens, and even their

fight. He wanted to slam the door in their faces and make up later, sulking as he did so. He wanted the normality that came with his family, the pleasantly quiet breakfasts and security.

But he no longer has that. And neither does his sister.

He leapt up in alarm as his door slammed open, scrambling to his feet as he pointed his wand at –a laughing Ron and Hermione.

“Harry!” Hermione’s smile was wide and sincere. “You’re up!”

“Finally,” Ron added. “We tried to bloody wake you up five times! You mumbled something about flowers, and –”

Oh, Violet had said it’d only been a night and a morning, hadn’t she?

“What time is it?”

“Time to put on some pants, mate.” Ron threw a pair of jeans at him. “Seriously, Harry, you were completely out.”

“Feels like I’ve slept for half a year.”

That was a lie. He felt like crap. But even now, the feelings were fading away into memory, into something not quite real, not quite tangible.

Hermione was looking at him shrewdly. He’d forgotten how perceptive she was. “Harry, did something happen?”

He really wondered if it had, if it had just been a very, very realistic dream. But dreams don’t hurt. Reality does.

Looking at them, at the two best friends who had been through hell and back with him, Harry realized that he couldn’t protect them by hiding that aching hole he felt in his chest, because it would eventually be them who patched it up. It would be them who would search for him after this was all over, trusting and hoping that Harry Potter had once again gotten himself out of a tight scrape. But his knee still hurt from the spell that had not caught and burned a hole

through his jeans, had not hurt him. In his past dreams he had always been invincible, and even when nightmares of failures, veils and tall towers invaded his mind, he could reason it away into intangible threats.

They were just dreams; they can't hurt him any more than reality could.

But this one had.

Ron just looked confused, throwing Hermione a side glance of concern. "Harry, did you go booty jumping while we were gone?"

"Bungee jumping, Ron, bungee jumping."

"What, like fellytones?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Now I know you're faking." She turned to Harry. "Tell us."

He did. He told them everything, receiving gasps and nods of approval at appropriate times from Hermione and laughter from Ron at inappropriate times. But Harry did see Ron's expression darken when he talked about Bill's death and Ron's Dementor being a dead, mangled Ginny.

"That's a very, very long dream."

"It's not a dream, Ron, it's a spell."

"No, Hermione, it's a very, very long dream induced by a spell."

Harry hesitated, allowing them to bicker a little longer. There was one question he wanted to ask, a reassurance he was afraid to get and not get.

"Hermione –do you think it was real? Any of it?"

She sobered, hearing the gravity in her friend's voice. "Well, what do you think, Harry?"

"I don't know, Hermione. I just don't know."

"It must have felt real to you then, to be so torn up about it."

Harry chuckled darkly. "Snape always said that I wore my heart on my sleeve."

"If I understand right, some of it was real. The Horcrux locations, even our personalities despite the changes. It wasn't just you, Harry. Information taken from you, Voldemort and the dead –all that was used to construct the most authentic world the spell could. And this old magic, the ones that use the dead's power –they're enormously complex, Harry, and enormously effective. Even if it was in your head, things were happening outside yourself. It was an alternate world, in every way possible."

"But how could this old magic know? Because yeah, Malfoy hesitated in trying to kill Professor Dumbledore, but that doesn't mean he'd turn double agent. It doesn't mean that –you're the brilliant one, Hermione. How could this –this thing in my head have known all that information?"

"Your mother said that they watched over you, even after all this time. Who's to say that Malfoy's grandparents weren't too? Or –or, my uncle, or a relative of Ron's. It was us because all that watching, all that knowledge went towards the spell."

Harry shook his head. "You don't understand, Hermione –I cared about these people. Almost as much as their real versions, you lot. My Mum, Dad, sister...they were there. I could touch them. And now that it's not real, it –"

"Hurts?"

He looked at Ron, wearing a rueful smile. "Yeah, it hurts. I had my parents and Sirius back. For a little while."

"But isn't it better to have them for a little while than not at all?"

“They aren’t real!” Harry fumed. “It was just a bloody illusion, a –”

“Your Mum said they were as true as they would have been if that had been the real world.”

Harry looked away from his brown haired friend, glaring at his nightstand like it had been the one that had cast an ancient spell on him, had given him everything he ever wanted and snatched it away in a single swoop.

A tight grip on his arm made him look up at the determined expressions on his friends’ faces. Hermione explained to him that this was no talk for a stuffy bedroom, so they led him out the door and down the stairs. They didn’t pass the cupboard, but Harry felt its presence even more than ever, the misery and loneliness of being Harry the orphan, Harry the freak, the victim of Harry Hunting. Harry, being hunted by a far superior opponent than Dudley, a far greater evil and sadism than the fulfillment of an insecure and cruel fat boy. But he would turn that around; if there was one thing still lingering from the dream that seemed so real was that sense of responsibility.

He’d always thought that he’d had no choice. No choice because of a stupid prophecy spoken, logged and shelved before he could even speak coherently, let alone understand it. He’d always thought that he would be hunted by evil, or become it himself for the greater good.

It hadn’t been Voldemort’s intention when he’d cast that spell, that curse and blessing, but Harry knew now that he did have a choice, he always had. He could take that power that the Dark Lord knows not and use it to save a world from collapsing in on itself. James Potter had refused to use Unforgivables because to kill for hate, for a deeply buried pleasure of power and control, is unforgivable, no matter how good the intentions. A line would be crossed when they became the enemy, and all would be lost.

That wasn’t what he was struggling with.

They stopped at the local park, deserted because the neighborhood kids would be tucked safely into their homes, into their families as they enjoyed their dinner.

The sun was falling, and it felt like the sky itself was too, but there was enough light for him to see clearly his two best, best friends as they led him to the swings. He hadn't realized until now just how much he'd missed them.

Immediately, he and Hermione claimed the two seats, smirking up at Ron.

"Well," he said, a bubble of laughter surprising him. "Why don't you sit down, ickle Won-Won?"

Ron scowled at the nickname and eyed the tiny baby swing warily. "Dunno, I think my arse is too big. You're bony, mate, why don't you try it?"

Harry laughed again. "Not bony enough."

They lapsed into silence, enjoying the cool breeze of the evening wind, the rustling grass and the sounds of being alive. He and Hermione swung lazily while Ron leaned against the metal bars of the swing set. It felt listless and easy, and he took the moment to close his eyes and collect his clashing emotions as he swung, his sneakers dragging back and forth against the bark and dirt. He was too tall and old for the swing set now, but its simplicity, its simple peace, still gave him pleasure.

No one had taught him how to swing; he'd learned himself. No one had ever pushed him; he'd done that himself too. Him and the wind. He remembered wondering if he swung high enough, reached high enough, he could touch the sky and heaven or whatever is supposed to be there after death. He remembered wondering if the wind could carry his voice high above him and towards the clouds so his parents could hear him. I miss you, he'd say, feeling nostalgia for these phantom people he hadn't even had a picture of, or Please come get me. I'll be a good boy –I won't do any of those freaky things at school again. I promise.

I promise.

They had heard him, he realized, they'd heard him very clearly, every time he tried to communicate with them in his childlike way, and their hearts had hurt with him. He felt that continuing knot in his chest, that longing, and wondered if this is what they had felt every day for the eternity that came with watching, but not touching.

He remembered hugging his mother, the way she'd melted against him in a wave of emotion, and he realized that that had been the first time she'd held her son since he was one. All those years, longing with a knot in her chest to protect, to love, to comfort, and she'd finally been able to do so as a ghost.

In his heart, he knew that, but his mind, the logical part of him that couldn't believe that all that, all of this could happen in his mind in a fortnight. He needed to be convinced that this was possible, that love really could transcend the laws of reality, the laws of magic. Or perhaps magic was love, and that was what his thick brain had been missing this entire time.

"You know," Ron said suddenly, "if it had been an alternate universe or whatever that you'd been in, wouldn't you be doubting the same things?" It surprised him that his friends would believe his crazy story unconditionally –but stranger things have happened to them.

"I dunno –I guess."

Hermione nodded eagerly, shooting a proud smile at Ron. "He's right, Harry. Because it would have been just as real then as your dream world had been –and that's what it was, Harry, a world. It was an alternate world that just happened to be housed in your brain instead of –of, oh, I dunno, the time-space continuum or something."

Harry laughed while Ron shot Hermione an odd look. "Is that Muggle thing?"

"That's beside the point. Anyway, Harry, you experienced it in every way possible, and now you're not there anymore. Now it's just memory, so it wasn't a dream, really."

“But –it’s not the same Hermione! I mean, if Ron had, say, a nightmare about being eaten alive by giant spiders, it doesn’t mean that he’s made a memory out of it.”

Ron winced. “Thanks loads, Harry. Now if I scream in my sleep tonight –”

“It wasn’t just a dream, Harry.”

He felt annoying, like that pretentious nag who needed to be told, needed to be convinced. But for those people to have been real –it was too good to be true, or too terrible to be true. For him to have truly experienced having a family, to have gone through all that with people he’d known here, in reality, people who were really those he loved hiding behind the mask of a dream. Hermione, Ron, Neville – they had all been there, waiting to be woken up, waiting to be unveiled.

“Harry,” Ron said quietly. “You have those pictures of your Mum and Dad, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Didn’t you –” His redheaded friend hesitated. “Didn’t you, I dunno, invent them in a way? Didn’t you invent this hatred for Sirius before we found out that he wasn’t the traitor? You had illusions of them and who they were –they weren’t memories. Now you have some, real ones. It wasn’t a waste.”

It wasn’t.

Hermione nodded. “My dad always told me to trust my instincts. ‘If your gut believes it, then it’s true,’ he’d say.”

His did.

“Thanks, you guys,” Harry said. “You know, it would have been just as ridiculous if I’d come back with soot all over me instead of just bed hair.”

Ron laughed. "Mate, you always have bed hair."

He grinned, relieved that, despite how many core similarities his Ron and the other shared, this Ron was here. Still, the essence had always been there, the protectiveness he felt towards his friends and family, towards those he loved. He let people laugh at their darkest fears, something the other Ron had not been comfortable enough around Harry to do so.

The essence was there, and wasn't that what his mother had been saying?

"It's getting dark." Harry pushed himself off the swings and placed a Disillusion Charm on himself.

"Harry, what are you doing?"

Knowing that they couldn't see him, he turned. "Just temporary until we can get back to the Dursleys' house and get the invisibility cloak." He began walking away, sneakers cushioning off the bark.

Ron hesitated before slowly following the sound of Harry's footsteps. "I don't get it."

But Harry merely smiled.

"I'm faking my death."

"Harry, that's –I don't know what to believe."

Harry sipped his tea before nodding at his former professor sympathetically. "I had a hard time believing of myself when I woke up, and I actually went through it."

Remus Lupin looked down at the careworn table of Grimmauld Place's kitchen, his eyes unfocused as he struggled with something inside of him. "You saw James? Lily? And Sirius, happy. No Azkaban, no –no young deaths. We'd been barely out of school when they died."

"I saw you too," Harry reminded him. "You were happy too, and all of you were my uncles –I mean, Dad almost choked me to death because he thought that by trying to accuse Wormtail, I was the Death Eater that –"

He looked down, unable to finish. It still felt too raw.

"Well, Sirius and James always said that as a monster, I was more Professor than werewolf." A sparkle of laughter brightened his eyes. "I suppose they were right. 'Moony won't eat the children, but he'll fill their heads with so much fluff that their brains explode.'"

"They would say something like that, wouldn't they?"

Remus smiled. "Yes. They never allowed me to go into one of 'those moods' for very long. Before I knew it my hair had turned bright purple and I was too busy chasing them around our dorm to feel sorry for myself anymore. And there was James's whining about Lily, our ultimately failed attempts at helping him get her attention."

Harry frowned, realizing he hadn't gotten many stories about his parents getting together when he'd had the chance. "How'd he deflate his ego then?"

"He showed her he could pull his weight in his Head duties. He got to know her and let her get to know him. But most importantly, he stopped listening to Sirius's suggestions."

"Sirius?"

"I think the bugger might have been a bit jealous –not that I think he was deliberately sabotaging James's chances, though. In between his personal problems with his family, with what the world was coming to...there hadn't been much time for girls. So his terrible ideas had been more out of inexperience if anything."

"He was really happy. I've never seen him looking the way he had here, like he was somehow still in Azkaban."

“Yes. It brings a strange comfort knowing that we could have had seventeen more years. Or, had seventeen more years if I understand what you’re saying.”

“One more year that I can remember.”

“Funny how that works, doesn’t it? I’m glad you got to meet them, Harry.”

“Me too.”

With that, they began talking business, Remus listening intently to everything he said, everything he had concluded from his adventure.

“The orphanage –that’s just willpower, and we can clear out the building beforehand. I’ll know to bypass the labyrinth this time; is there somewhere we can get a Minotaur horn?”

Remus paused to think. “There was a creature shop that I found in Romania on my travels. I believe they have one, and I’ve never known any of their items to be anything but genuine.”

“Gringotts, everything else –I won’t screw up this time. I won’t.”

Harry told him of how they must act quickly, destroying the Horcruxes in separate groups around the same time so Voldemort would not suspect what they were up to.

“Yes,” Remus mused. “If he thinks you’re dead, that his spell succeeded, he’ll move all the quicker to capture the Wizarding World now that the only person blocking him is dead. But does he know?”

Harry frowned. “I dunno, I’d just assumed that he did –”

“Dumbledore has put wards in place so he cannot monitor you at the Dursleys. Those, of course, will not be in effect on your birthday, so –”

“So he doesn’t know. Can we leak it to the Daily Prophet?”

“We could. We’d need to create a false body, a false memorial for you. But your connection to him is still present, is it not? How is your Occlumency?”

Harry straightened. He was more hesitant about this, the one thing he couldn’t quite get right. “I think –I think I can manage.”

“You need to be sure, Harry.”

There wasn’t a lot about his life right now that was sure. But he did know that, unlike fifth year, he now knew the difference between fantasy and reality.

“Yeah,” he said as Remus stood up to leave the room. “I’m sure. But Professor?”

The last Marauder turned. “Yes, Harry?”

“Promise me.”

“What?”

“Promise me that when we get to the end, and I can’t –I can’t get this Horcrux out of me, promise that you’ll kill me.”

Remus’s eyes widened in distress. “Harry, don’t –”

“It might happen. I’ll try my hardest not to let that happen, but if it does –promise me.”

Still, this man, this last connection to his parents, hesitated, shaking his head slowly at the absurdity that his best friend’s son wanted him to commit. Harry must live. He had to.

“Promise me. If you ever escaped in your wolf form, without Wolfsbane, you would ask the same thing, wouldn’t you?”

He merely looked at him with sad, sad eyes. “It doesn’t look like I have much choice, do I? But I’ll never be able to forgive myself.”

“No, Remus. It would be necessary.” Harry sucked in a large breath of air. “I’m –I’m ready.”

But Remus knew better. He knew that no one could be ever prepared for death, not completely. Still, he saw the logic of Harry Potter’s reasoning, the same spark of determination that shone in Lily’s eyes, the same stubborn stance as James. Merlin, it had better not come to that.

“I promise, Harry.”

He’s been here before, but the battleground is different; instead of the Riddle house, it’s Hogwarts, the one place where he’s been proud to call his home. This time, the finality had come quicker, sped up with the relatively smooth destruction of Voldemort’s Horcruxes –all but one. All but him, all but the shard of soul and corruption inside of him.

Everything was different, yet all the same; his friends were still throwing their lives on the line, still in danger of the permanence of death, the permanence of being suffocated and distorted by the bodies falling all around them. Harry could only hope that theirs did not join the fray.

It has come down to this, after all.

“Harry Potter.” The Dark Lord’s flat nostrils flared. “Faking your death? A cunning trick. Worthy of a Slytherin, I should say.”

He stayed silent, concentrating on his Occlumency.

“Are you afraid, Harry Potter?”

You will lose everything.

“No.”

Voldemort sniffed. “Honesty. I appreciate that, Harry. But do you really want such a –such a negative word to be your last?”

Harry almost snorted. His Mum was right; Voldemort really did like to talk. Surreptitiously, he waited for his window of opportunity, as he knew Voldemort was waiting for him. It had to be the right moment, the vulnerable moment from which Voldemort could not escape –and then it'd be the real challenge.

“Tell me, Harry Potter, how did you escape? Surely you must have seen...terrible things.”

Yes. He'd seen his sister almost become consumed by darkness. He'd seen his friends, changed and embittered by separate experiences. He'd seen his mother die and his grieving father accuse him of her murder. He'd seen the anguish in Sirius's eyes, the same haunting quality that had held and trapped them in reality. He'd seen Remus's sad smile, tired and worn. He'd seen that Muggle nun, who had been touched and damaged by Tom Riddle's work as a teenager. As a kid like Harry, as a child who was not a child.

But he'd also seen them conquer.

So would he.

Voldemort sneered as he circled slowly around Hagrid's pumpkin patch, surprisingly untouched by the destruction currently raging around them, in the distance. It was odd to be so separated, so detached from the mayhem and screams and lights taking place all around Hogwarts, in the Great Hall, at the Quidditch Pitch, in the Great Hall –there were no witnesses here.

But Hermione had never been captured, Neville had never changed into a Minotaur, Bill and Padma were still alive, Parvati had never been the victim of Sectumsempra and Draco had been offered a chance for escape. Even now, Draco, Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy were fighting what had used to be their side. Even now, the Death Eaters were surrounded by the Order and those the Malfoys had recruited, the former troops of the Dark Lord's cause that were brought to Harry's side by their disillusionment of Voldemort's cruelty, their pride and loyalty broken by the deaths of their family and friends. Voldemort had dug his own grave.

“Are you afraid to lose?” Harry said quietly.

“It’s always been between me and you, Harry. I thought this was appropriate.”

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was scared, Harry knew that. That’s why he had cast that spell on Harry, why he had hit him with a curse strong enough to propel him to such an isolated spot, away from the main battle. Still, Harry’s chest hurt from the impact, and he could feel himself wheezing , he needed to keep his strength.

“How did you escape?”

In that moment, Harry wanted him to know. He wanted Voldemort to know that the one thing he could never understand, the one thing he couldn’t fight or destroy had propelled Harry out of the nightmare, out of the fate Voldemort had in store for him. He wanted him to know that the very thing his cold, cold heart couldn’t feel or comprehend is what was going to defeat him once and for all –for good this time.

Harry smiled. “Love.”

Something unreadable flashed across Voldemort’s flat, pallid face, and Harry seized his opportunity.

This is for you, Mum, Dad, Violet. All of you.

“Avada Kedavra!”

He felt no hatred as the spell eased from his heart, from the core of his magic to the tip of his wand. He felt nothing but peace and a sudden connection to those he’d lost as green light expelled from a stick of wood and struck a horrified Voldemort in the chest. He felt nothing but calm as his worst enemy’s body lay sprawled on the ground at an awkward angle, reminding him uncomfortably of Cedric Diggory.

He’d done it. The deed he had been expected to do, the murder that the Wizarding World had egged him to commit. The kill the public had

expected of him despite not believing him about Voldemort's return at first. He didn't feel evil, but he had to wonder if –

“Arghh!”

His scar was on fire, splitting down the middle of his head, splitting his face into two –he recalled with horror Quirrell's two headed monstrosity and clutched his face with his hands. Even through the pain, he was able to feel relief that there had been no physical change, but inside him, in his chest, he could feel it –that thing, rising.

Fight it, Harry, fight it.

He heard someone screaming, but it could very well have been him. He felt that unexplainable presence gaining consciousness, gaining confidence as it began to fight him for control.

There was a terrifying moment when he had no say over what his body was doing, nor was the knowledge of its actions known to him. For a terrifying moment, all he knew was pain and darkness; it felt like someone was grabbing onto his heart, preparing to rip it messily from his chest. He felt Voldemort and his sadistic intentions pumping through his bloodstream, through his arteries and veins, violating his very being.

He fought this presence, waiting for the protection to kick in, waiting for what had helped expel Voldemort when he'd possessed him before.

But it wasn't coming, and Voldemort continued crawling his way up, a squirming, greedy presence within him consuming all the darker parts of him, the arrogance, the anger –but most of all, the self-hatred.

All your fault, it whispered to him. It's all your fault.

Are you afraid to lose?

Your parents, dead. Unborn sister, dead. Sirius, dead. Dumbledore, dead. And how many others, dying for you now? Dying for you to LOSE.

“No,” Harry mumbled, taking control of his voice. “No, no, no, no, no...”

This wasn't the same, he realized. This was different. It wasn't just a simple possession; it was an army of his darkest fears and inhibitions taking him over. The Horcrux had resided inside of him for sixteen years, lived inside of him greedily, quietly awaiting its activation. It was Harry's own wolf, waiting to be unleashed in the moonlight.

And in that time, it had developed immunity to that blood protection. It wasn't going to be of any help to him now.

“Harry!”

A voice, breaking through the haze, through the flashing images of falling, flying bodies and veiled threats. A gentle, familiar tone tinted with an edge of panic.

Okay, Harry admitted deliriously. Maybe a lot of panic.

Ahhh, the werewolf. A sentimental fool, just like your precious Dumbledore.

“Shut up, shut up!” Harry shouted, groaning as he violently covered his ears with his palms.

“Harry, you've got to fight it. Remember who you are –you can beat him! He's just a man.”

Just a man? Who continues to live while others have died?

It wasn't just Remus now. He felt Voldemort growing stronger, Harry growing weaker even as familiar faces surrounded him, watching in fearful fascination as the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One, fought demons none of them could help him with. He caught a glimpse of Hermione, biting her lip as her eyes bore into him, tears threatening to spill. He saw Ron, grasping her hand as he yelled unheard encouragements to his best friend. Neville and Luna, solemn and hoping. Ginny, no tears in sight, but angry as she tried to help Harry

fight the very being that had possessed her six years ago –a being that, in a different world, would have taken his sister.

Strange, that. Where were the Death Eaters? Why were his friends so close? They shouldn't worry about him, they needed to save themselves!

Fools, all of them. Why should they put themselves in danger just to watch little, insignificant, weak Harry Potter die a slow death?

He was losing –Merlin, he'd been so sure that he could win, but he was just the little scrawny runt living in the cupboard under the stairs after all, hated by his blood relatives and ignored by everyone else...

He was losing himself, his slippery hold already in danger of this invasive parasite within him, moving at a rapid pace.

"Remus," he gasped, fighting Voldemort's attempts to grind his teeth together. "You...have to...now."

His fingers were no longer his own. They twitched desperately as the two fought for control, his arm jerking roughly, gradually, towards the pocket where his wand had taken refuge. It hummed in recognition, in anticipation, and the magic drew his ambivalent fingers to grasp it.

Shameful relief swept through him as he felt Remus's spell hit him in the chest, but it had only propelled him backwards, stunning Voldemort for a brief respite.

He believes in me, Harry realized. He still thinks I can win.

In the back of his mind, he could feel the dark presence stabilizing itself, and for the first time he realized just how much magical energy they had vibrating and pulsing around them, almost as if this clash of light and dark, this mingling of good and evil and all the grey in between had a life of its own.

The werewolf is mistaken if he relies on a faulty savior.

It happened too quickly for Harry to react. He watched helplessly as his own, traitorous hand swiped his wand and his own betraying voice call out the killing curse, ending Remus Lupin's life with a flash of green. Ginny was next, and Ron and Luna before Harry managed to grasp his right hand with his left, forcing the other to the ground. He felt his eyes trailing back to the destruction, to the failing, to his failure.

That's right, Harry, your strength is gone now. They will hate you, they will –

No.

This isn't right. He registered the scene before him, registered that he should be feeling grief, that he should be devastated and hating himself for being so weak. But he wasn't.

There was no sorrow in his gut, in his heart.

You are weak, Harry Potter, you will never equal me in power, in the Dark Magic that ultimately defeated you –

This wasn't real. This was no memory, no ghost of a reality. Merely a vision, a false vision created by Voldemort to unhinge him, to destroy him. That knowledge was a fragment of sanity, of anchor and stability, and he eagerly grasped it as Sirius Black had once clung to the knowledge of his innocence. He'd already lived through a dream-reality once before, and he knew in his gut that this wasn't one of them.

No.

Yes. Harry seized control of his mind, his body, his heart –but in reality, it had always been his, had been waiting for him to wake up and take it back. His experience in a world where his parents were alive, the scar and muscle memory, the love he had for the people dead and alive –those were his, and couldn't be taken from him.

Harry woke up. He opened his eyes and saw the others still watching him, still hoping and longing and loving. Still alive.

But so was Voldemort, still.

He felt rather than saw it, felt the chill and ice in the air and ground as one of the last remaining Dementors swooped down, drawn to the feast of Dark Magic and misery. He knew Remus wasn't going to kill him, wasn't going to go through on the promise he'd made to him –he wasn't going to put him down as a monster because he knew Harry was better than that. He knew Harry could win.

“Don't do it!” Harry yelled, hoping against hope that they understood him. Because it would take all of his strength to do this, to confront fear itself.

He'd fought his fair share of Dementors, even more so in the dream-reality, where their power had seemed to touch everything terrible and cruel. Ironical, he thought. Maybe they'll finally give rather than take away. Salvation through destruction.

He would protect his friends, no matter what. He would not make his parents' sacrifice, Violet's pain, Sirius's fall and Dumbledore's memory worth nothing. He would pay back all those who had watched him so closely in death, watched and cared and loved him by saving all those who were left.

With Voldemort still bragging in the back of his mind, still arrogantly trying to tear down his defenses and usurp his mind as he had a few months ago with the dream-reality, Harry seized all the self-control he had in store and threw himself at the Dementor.

It caught him with its dead, spindly fingers, staring down at him with hungry, soulless eyes that longed for what it did not have, what it could not have. Its great, gaping mouth gripped Harry in its horrible stench, paralyzing him with fear. It was easy to let go, to give control of his body to this final piece of Voldemort, to make him the dominant soul for the seconds it'd take to offer him as a sacrifice to the greedy, demented Dementor.

Voldemort's screams echoed in his mind as his lips made contact with the mouth of the dry, corpse-like creature, sucking him up into

oblivion, into endless hunger, into misery and pain and sorrow and a loveless existence Tom Riddle was already living.

His mother was screaming as she died a double death, his father gripped his son's neck in unrestrained, feral grief, his sister tasted the rain on her tongue as she acknowledged her non-existence. Neville squirmed painfully as he transformed back from a Minotaur, Ron writhed as he was captured by the living brains of the Department of Mysteries, Ginny laid pale and lifeless as water lapped around her body in the Chamber of Secrets. Luna, asking if Harry had seen her shoes. Sirius, alone and haunted as he was trapped in the childhood home he despised. Remus, hunched alone by the Weasleys' fireplace at Christmas. Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Failed.

But he hadn't. He saw through the misery to see what had been gained, what had been saved. The last thought he had before he faded away was that, despite everything, they had won.

He felt free.

Harry Potter floated. He floated between worlds, between consciousness and unconsciousness, between dream and reality, not bothering to make sense of the two. It was white –rather too white, like the world had been blanketed in brilliant snow.

He had no sense of up or down, right or left. It was merely existence and non-existence, and he was aware of nothing but the lightness in his toes and fingers, the lack of burden on his shoulders. He slowly blinked open his green eyes occasionally, catching bits and pieces as he floated, floated...

Do you think Remus was too late?

Voldemort's gone, that's all I –

Scrimgeour, you have no right to be here!

I don't know, Nymphadora, maybe I shouldn't have waited so long...

Think he'll ever wake up?

"I'd say that's up to you, Harry."

He wanted to turn around, but he felt so peaceful, so light, so –

"Lazy? Well, that can be remedied."

His body awoke with a jolt as something grabbed his leg and pulled, hard. Harry fell messily, seeming to be supported by nothing but white clouds.

"See? That wasn't so hard, was it?"

He really should be surprised, he really should. But turning around and seeing his father seemed natural. Almost normal.

"Hey Dad."

"Hey yourself." James Potter crossed his arms and scanned his surroundings with a smile. "Interesting. I prefer being on a broom when I'm surrounded by clouds, but that's just me."

"Right."

"Your mother's already spent time with you, so we thought it'd only be fair for my turn."

"Oh. Okay."

James grimaced sympathetically. "Yeah, you've had quite an odd time lately, even by wizarding standards."

"I suppose."

"Do you know where you are?"

"In a coma, I expect."

"Good, good, you've got some awareness..."

Harry met his father's eye. "Did I –is he –?"

"Yes. The Horcrux is gone."

"You mean Voldemort."

"No. It was a very dangerous piece of Dark Magic that had the potential of becoming Voldemort. Thanks to you, that soul fragment never completely manifested."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief before laying back. "Then it wasn't a waste, then."

"No, it wasn't. It doesn't have to be if you don't want it to."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you have a choice whether to fight or, well, die."

Harry groaned. "Great, more choices, more worldly duties for Harry bloody Potter."

"This isn't a worldly choice, Harry. It's a personal one. The Wizarding World couldn't give a shit about whether you live or die. Well, most, at least. If you choose death, history will mark you a martyr. Choose life, and you're an international hero and celebrity. I'm sure Remus and your friends would prefer that you make it, but like always, it's what you want that counts."

"So you chose to choke me?"

Harry watched his father squirm, the guilt settling onto the features of a man sixteen years dead.

"Sorry, Dad, that –"

"No, no, you're right. Not my proudest moment."

"But it wasn't you."

He shook his head. "Oh, it was, Harry...it was. It's hard to admit, but that was a painfully accurate representation of what my reaction would have been. You –you are a different person than the dream-Harry you supposedly replaced. The changes were small and subtle, yes, but they were there and if I had been in that position I would have spotted them. The world's full of liars and cheats and I would have suspected that one of those lot had kidnapped my son and masqueraded as him."

"If I'd told you –the other you– the truth, would –" Harry paused, looking down at his bare feet, supported by nothing.

"Yes," James said confidently. "I would have believed you. Too many strange things had happened to...and you can't fake everything, not completely. Your eyes are too much like your mother's, too revealing –she always hated that. Besides," he added, grinning, "you're just too cute to reject. Lily would always pinch your chubby cheeks and make those funny baby noises while Sirius and Remus made fun of her for it..."

Harry could only nod, straining his ears to listen intently to the whispers that buzzed the back of his head, like an itch.

Wish he would say something...scream in his sleep, even, to let us know that he's still there...

"Is it easier, dying?"

"No. Not at all. Not when you're leaving something behind."

He didn't particularly want to die; after all, he had his friends, his adopted families –he would never taste Mrs. Weasley's cooking again, which would be a right shame. And he didn't think he could stand seeing Hermione and Ginny cry –or Ron, for that matter. He noticed James watching him intently, but for some reason he couldn't bring himself to care.

"That's apathy you're feeling," his father explained. "The indifference that could prove to be a very real reality when you're dead."

“But I’m not dead.”

“No.”

Harry’s foot was asleep. Impatiently, he stomped on it, realizing that James was right –he did feel sluggish. But as the tingly feeling in his leg slowly went away, so did his listless movements. Strangely enough, the more focus he had, the harder it was to hear the voices on the outside, on the other side of his brain, mind, whatever unreal and existing place he was currently in.

But it had made him more alert. And with that comes questions he needed answered, unfinished business that needed to be attended to before returning to life.

“Is Violet okay?”

“Yes, she’s fine. I can’t say more than that. Rules, you know.”

“What about Wormtail? I hope they caught him at Hogwarts...”

“No, he’s dead.”

“What?” Somehow, death seemed too easy an out for the sniveling rat, even if he had saved Hermione at the cost of his own life in that dream-reality.

“You didn’t see? It was before Voldemort whisked you away to Hagrid’s pumpkin patch, during the heat of battle. You couldn’t possibly –well, you were dueling a Death Eater when another tried to kill you, against his master’s orders; I think he could see that they were losing, and wanted to finish you quickly. Peter jumped in the way.”

“No he didn’t. I didn’t see –”

“I think you were a little preoccupied.”

“Well, if he did, it was just because he owes me a life debt.”

James inclined his head. "That was a good thing for you to do, to spare Remus and Sirius from becoming killers."

"He got away."

"And saved your life, in the end. It might have been because of the life debt but –but I'd like to think better of little Peter. Could just be vanity though; I don't want to think that I'd been so wrong about a person, especially a Gryffindor."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "How do I know I can trust you?"

James shrugged. "You don't. But if you really believed I was a figment of your imagination or a hallucination within the coma, you'd have stopped listening to me long ago."

This was frustrating and annoying, especially since Harry had to make a deliberate effort to sort through his own thoughts. He didn't realize until he saw the sad, sad expression on his father's face that his lips were pursed, pouting that the puzzle was not yet completely solved.

"You should be allowed to do that more often. Be a brat, I mean." He laughed, but it sounded hollow. "If I were –well, I can't change that now, but you shouldn't have been expected to be an adult when you clearly weren't."

"Weren't?"

"You remind me of Remus. Far older than he should be, especially at your age."

"So I should be a right idiot like you were?" Harry joked.

James snorted. "Oh, maybe not then. But I think there might have been some denial of what was happening in the world mixed in with the immaturity."

"Don't try and make excuses now!"

“Hey, you’re focusing better. Feel easier now? That means you’re getting close to getting out of here.”

Harry looked down at the hands that had murdered Lord Voldemort. It was murder, no matter what anyone said, murder done for the greater good. And though he felt an immense relief, a lightness in the way he now carried himself, his hands are now stained.

“I think you were right to never use the Unforgivables. It takes something away from you.”

James nodded. “It does. When I used the Cruciatus once, just once, for a few seconds...it couldn’t have lasted more than five seconds, but it was enough. I cried like a baby once I got back home, to safety. It was to save your mother, but also not to –I saw them torturing her, and wanted to repay the favor. A simple Stun would have done the trick but –but I, for a moment, became one of them.”

“You?” Harry asked, surprised. “You used one too?”

“Why do you think I’m so against it?”

Harry looked down, suddenly filled with shame. “There’s always been something in me...that darkness that Violet had. The Horcrux, or the way I grew up, I don’t know where it came from exactly, but it’s there. And I feel like, after I killed someone, it’s just going to get worse. That I’ll become the next Lord Voldemort.”

“Is that why you’re hesitating about going back?”

“Maybe –maybe it’ll be better if I died, here. We’re so similar, and I could easily become him, now that I’ve taken the first step.”

James shook his head, approaching his son and placing comforting hands on his shoulder. “You’re not Tom Riddle. You have something he doesn’t.”

“Love. I know.”

“Then you know how that makes all the difference. He killed for pleasure and power. You killed to prevent those you love from having to do it themselves. Because it would have come to that, you know, if you hadn’t killed him. It would have been the beginning of the descent, where life is no longer sacred.”

Harry frowned, not quite believing him. “A lot of people have died.”

“Yes. And with one more, permanent death, the killing ends. Most of it, anyway. All the Death Eaters had been taken care of before you killed Voldemort, you know. Scrimgeour’s Aurors arrived after all, though I don’t know if it was his order, Moody’s encouragement and threats, or of their own accord. Wasn’t paying attention to that at the time...too busy watching you. Sirius wanted to sell tickets; not that money’s any good up there.”

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“He wanted to keep our minds off the danger, the reality that your confrontation would determine everything –but most importantly, the life of our son and godson.”

“So you were there, with me?”

“In a matter of speaking.”

“Just like in the graveyard, fourth year.”

“We’re always with you, even if you can’t see us.” James smiled at him sadly, but not for the first time. “That was one of the few times we could physically be of use. Otherwise we’re just whispers –”

“In my dreams.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. For there and then. Tell Violet that –”

James nodded, but Harry found that he couldn’t say anymore, that he was slowly becoming aware of every ache and pain, the cotton

brushing against naked fingertips. He watched as his father grew further away and as the harsh lights overhead became more prominent.

He wanted to open his eyes, but the lights, so different from the effervescent snowy clouds of before, refused to oblige him.

“Is he –Ron. Ron, wake up!”

“Wha –OW, that hurts, Hermione!”

“Look!” Something warm touched his hands, startling Harry with the contact. “Harry? Harry, it’s Hermione...”

“And Ron.”

Harry blinked, just barely making out the blur of Hermione glaring at Ron if he squinted.

“Gl –glasses.”

Someone gently placed his glasses into his awaiting palm, but he didn’t put them on. Instead, he allowed himself to be strangely comforted at the touch of familiar plastic and glass, the mended edges that, before magic, had been haphazardly kept together with tape. And even then that had come to him second handed.

There was nothing second handed about this. Harry Potter, the Chosen One, had been the first and only to defeat Voldemort, to lift the Wizarding World from its perilous descent.

He didn’t know if it felt all that great, finally coming up first.

“Harry?”

His friends were starting to get past their joy and relief, stumbling into uncertainty and concern. How could they be so concerned for him? he thought mournfully. They’d lost so many; too many had not lived to see this day, including people Harry didn’t even know about, Order members and Aurors and Death Eaters who had fallen, unwatched,

unnoticed. Because even the dead had not been paying attention to or given importance to their deaths –no, they’d been watching Harry Potter.

“Harry, mate, c’mon –er, look, a seven foot tall spider!”

“That only works on you, Ron.”

“Shut up, Hermione. Harry, please, you’re still in there, aren’t you?”

His mind felt strangely clouded, groggy; he’d had that wondrous moment of clarity as he’d first become aware of waking up out of the coma, but that seemed to be leaving him now, failing, abandoning. Now he no longer felt light and protected, but weighed down by the world’s wearies.

Perhaps he’d made the wrong choice.

“Who’d we lose?”

His voice was still hoarse, still cracked and broken. He hated it.

“Harry,” Hermione said gently. “You’ve been out for almost three weeks. We were afraid the Dementor had gotten some of you, or –or brain damage or something.”

Harry registered her sniffles and the beginning of glistening tears, Ron’s silent hand on her shoulder. What? He felt, slowly, pulled out of his apathy; he didn’t like seeing his friends, and especially girls, cry. That just made him uncomfortable, and he’d never had a particularly good experience with crying girls and –

“Stop, Hermione,” he said rather desperately. “Don’t cry. Just, er, hold it in or –”

But before he could even push his glasses on the bridge of his nose, Hermione had launched herself at him, mumbling incoherently in delight. Ron caught the glasses that had tumbled out of Harry’s hands and looked at his two best friends quizzically.

“Oh, bloody hell!”

Harry wanted to laugh, feeling a bit of joy and life flow back into him as Ron joined the group hug, sure that he would suffocate if there were a fourth. He did laugh, thinking about what would happen if Hagrid had come in at that moment, giant tears spilling messily down into his beard.

When the friends broke apart, grinning stupidly at each other, they couldn't help but indulge in their happiness, their miracle, no matter what had befallen people they knew and didn't know, loved and never loved.

They rejoiced because they had lived, they had Harry back; they were complete, they no longer had an aching hole in their sides. Because no matter how badly they felt for those who didn't make it, they couldn't help but celebrate that it hadn't been them.

Or perhaps it was that they chose to do the dead the honor of not wasting their sacrifice, of wasting away the chance they had – perhaps that was their prerogative, and what had made them get past the nagging guilt to something like recovery.

They knew that people had died, knew that their world, their lives, were in shambles. And for an indulgent, precious moment, they allowed themselves to be scared. They let their hands intertwine and lock, overlapping their past, present and future as they sought strength from those who understood. Hermione and Ron had been with Harry from the start of his rebirth into his magical heritage, and they'd grown old too, far older than seventeen, than seventh years gathered around the Common Room fire or sprinting down an empty corridor laughing because –well, why wouldn't they?

So they sat there in comfortable silence. No heavy questions, no inquiries about the final battle or death or what the hell they're going to do now. Just the innocently pure, white walls, the soft privacy of the curtains and the over bleached sheets. They could carry their burdens later, together.

They had time.

It's been years, decades, since Harry Potter lay on the brink of death and had the conversation with his father about life, death and purpose. Now that he's back to the crossing, after living a fulfilled life, he can't help but feel mixed emotions.

All he could have asked of his life, and death, was that he fulfill it to the best of his abilities, and to have no regrets, in the end.

So here he was, many, many years after the defeat of Lord Voldemort, finally entering the place he had chosen not to go, where the family he'd lost at the age of one had resided until a dream-reality had brought them briefly back to him.

Upon his arrival, he was met with familiar faces of Hogwarts classmates, Order members, distant relations, people he'd encountered over the years. They all seemed to pass by him quickly, smiling, knowing that he had somewhere to be; there was time for re-introductions later.

He passed by Professor McGonagall, who clasped his hand in hers and gave him a little push in the right direction. He saw Severus Snape, who merely scowled at him, though Harry thought it seemed less menacing than usual. Neville, who gave him a mighty smack on the back as the two smiled at each other; each had bore the burden of being the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One at a point, and Harry could never forget his friend's bravery in either realm. He saw so many others, those who had fallen during the wars, who had died in the aftermath and the decades of relative peace after that.

He saw Professor Dumbledore, still wearing half-moon glasses and bearing a prominently crooked nose, beaming at him.

"They're waiting, Harry."

He felt his heart swell with joy as he spotted the familiar figures he had been too young to know, too stubborn to believe a dream could possibly give him the family he wanted so much. James, Lily. And Remus and Sirius! No matter how unreal it seemed, no matter how long ago he'd lost his parents and godfather, how recently Remus

had passed, they were here, they were familiar, like whispers in his dreams.

“Harry.”

With that, they rushed at each other like they hadn't seen each other in years, hadn't touched since that reality defying hug, the hands on his shoulders. They mumbled incoherent things to each other, things that could be clarified later on. They had time.

As he was lovingly embraced by his mother and father, another flash of red caught Harry's eye. Stunned, he slowly pulled away from his long dead parents and squinted, needing to see her clearly without his glasses, without the impediments of reality and dreams.

“Violet?”

The sixteen-year-old smiled and approached him silently. She looked the same –he didn't.

“You –you're not –”

“I know,” she said. “Thanks to you and –well, Voldemort I suppose, to an extent, but let's not count him, yeah?”

A sudden surge of emotion rushed through him, the same emotion that had told him all those years ago that what he went through had been real, had been as real as his heart could tell.

“I never forgot you, you know.”

Violet smiled. “I know that too.”

It was true. No matter how much he had known it was a spell, no matter how long it had been since that half a year and single night, he had never forgotten the phantom sister he should have had, the parents who should have survived. It would hit him at random times, stunning him when he looked at a family photo and realize that he would never have nieces and nephews on his side of the family –only on his wife's.

He didn't mind, of course –there had always been plenty of little ones to spoil, but sometimes he couldn't help but think of what could have been. What would have been, had destiny been reversed.

He'd always known that, despite the ill intentions of the dream reality, he had taken something good out of it. He'd gotten to know his family, but he'd always felt a nagging pull of selfishness. Sure, he had gotten to see them, but what had it cost them? Would Violet go back into non-existence, knowing that she could have had life, or some form of it? Would his parents continue to watch, his mother having held him that one time, his father having spoken to him, guided him, in his coma? Would they continue to be observers to Harry's life, the life that the dead could not have?

But now, seeing Violet here –sixteen still, but here– and his parents' happy faces and the wet tear tracks on his mother's cheeks, a smiling Remus and an overjoyed Sirius, he knew that it had been worth it to them too. It had not been a waste.

"Hey, come here." Harry suddenly felt himself in a bear hug with Sirius Black, who was smiling at him broadly, looking more like the version of him in the dream-reality –no longer haunted. He looked positively youthful. "I see you were still using your old Firebolt, to the end."

"Yeah," Harry said, grinning. "It's the best model, no matter what they're coming up with these days. Better for backyard pick up games, I think." He turned to Remus. "Hello, again."

Remus smiled, the age around his eyes lifting. "You've done a good job, Harry."

"Well of course," James said proudly. "What else do you expect from my son?"

Lily punched him in the shoulder. "He practically rebuilt the Ministry, James. I don't think you can take credit for that piece of genetic brilliance."

“And you can?”

Harry shook his head. “I had a lot of help.”

But Lily wasn’t paying attention to the conversation any longer. Instead, her eyes trailed to something to the right of him.

Harry shifted his gaze and spotted Peter Pettigrew standing off to the side, away from the smiles and sad regret of their reunion. He saw Lily Potter notice him, her eyes indecisive, until she surprised him and approached the traitor who had tried so badly to be a hero.

Harry knew better than anyone how emotional, how confusing it was to see people who had been dead for seventeen years suddenly in front of him, suddenly real and solid and made the things he’d done in the past suddenly part of the present. He wondered how they could not have crossed paths during such a long period of time –Wormtail certainly looked shaken up. He hoped he had been in purgatory, or somewhere painful.

Lily stood in front of the man called Wormtail, the one who she had told the day of her own funeral in a world inside Harry’s mind that she could never forgive him.

He looked shocked, devastated, scared –but most of all, guilty.

“I’m sorry,” he cried, tears spilling messily down his cheeks, his teeth irreversibly chattering from his twelve years as a rat. “I’m so sorry. I –I wasn’t going to come, but something, something made me and –oh Merlin. I just –I’ll stay away, forever, if that’s what you want. I don’t even know why I’m here all of a sudden, with all of you, instead of hell or–”

“You’re here because you did the right thing, in the end,” she said. “You hurt us but –but you protected my son and his friend, in another time.”

“It doesn’t make what I did go away,” he said miserably.

“No, it doesn’t. But it makes redemption possible.”

It was true. Peter Pettigrew had a lifetime, one in which he had been accepted into a group of pranksters, whose bond had been so strong that it had shattered at the very idea that one of the four was a betrayer. Because of him, James and Sirius had suspected Remus Lupin, and inadvertently treated the werewolf like the monster they'd always sworn to never see him as. After their betrayal of his friendship, Remus had been seen as the dark creature whose deliberate isolation after a decapitating loss could only indicate his guilt, his ill intentions. Because of him, Lily and James had died too young, their lifetime cut short and a daughter left unborn. Because of him, Harry Potter had grown up in a cupboard under the stairs, knowing his parents as ideas rather than people. Because of him, Peter became Wormtail, cowering as a rat for twelve years as he slowly lost his humanity.

They only have one lifetime, but death is but the next great adventure, and they have all the time they need. Eternity is a long time to spend alone, locked away in the clouds, separated from the world they'd once loved until they completely forgot the events of their lifetime.

It had taken Dumbledore a long time to find and coax Ignacius Fatum into caring enough to divulge the information they hoped would save Harry, to look up with his old, empty eyes, part the clouds and see for the first time in a very long time, how important the ancient information stored away in his memories were.

Lily had found Fatum again, after Harry had won; she'd wanted to thank him for giving them that vital information. But his eyes had been vacant, and though he had inclined his head at her in acknowledgement, her gratitude meant nothing to him anymore.

Peter's betrayal was still very, very fresh, even after so many years, and she still remembers the guilt, the terrible gnawing feeling in her gut when James had softly told her his suspicions about Remus, her Prefect partner, her friend. She was glad that, at least, Remus Lupin had gotten his happy ending, something that had been held out of his reach for so long.

But she also remembers the Peter from school, the one so eager to please and make her laugh at his antics. She knew that she wouldn't be able to forgive herself if Peter became like Fatum, if he lost whatever else was left of who he used to be.

In happier times, she would have grabbed his arm and yanked the smaller man towards the group, towards her husband, son and friends, but the thought of touching him disgusted her now. So she merely inclined her head and began walking, feeling his hesitant steps following her a few seconds after.

Lily saw the confusion in Harry's eyes, the flash of hatred as he watched Wormtail approach. She held her son's gaze, slowly reminding him of forgiveness, of what the traitor had done in dream and reality.

Harry turned away, not quite ready to forgive. Everything was still fresh for him, he had been active, not observing and reflecting, but there would be time for that later. Instead, he averted his gaze to his father, whose eyes held ambivalence and indecision. He turned to Violet, his partner in crime, and the only one who had felt as acutely as he had the death of their mother in the dream reality.

But she shrugged, inclining her head at Remus, who had extended a hand towards their wayward friend. But he was the most inclined to forgiveness, and it would be a long road there, if it ever happened. They had time.

Harry turned to Violet.

"I missed you," he said.

Violet grabbed hold of her brother's hand, laughing as she pulled him towards the ever expanding landscape.

"Come on, Harry, let's go on an adventure."